

The book cover features two anime-style characters. In the foreground, a young woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue school uniform, looks slightly to the side. Behind her, a young man with spiky blonde hair and red eyes, wearing a red and white outfit, looks forward with a determined expression. The background is a mix of dark and light colors with some glowing effects.

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# Fate/strange Fake

フェイト/ストレンジ・フェイク

# Fate/Strange Fake

Volume 2

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フェイト / ストレンジ フェイク

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Interlude

“The Little Red Riding Hood  
of Semina Apartments”

## **Interlude**

The Red Riding Hood of Semina Apartments

It was the kind of ghost story you might hear anywhere.

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There is place called Fuyuki.

A large river runs through the center of the town, splitting it into the urban New City, where skyscrapers and shopping malls stand in rows, and Miyamachō, where homes and nature from the old days remain mostly untouched. A provincial city that incorporates a variety of hues on the same land.

But this land has another face.

It is one of Japan's foremost sacred grounds; a ground that mages of the three families known as the Einzberns, Tōsaka, and Makiri had once refined into the foundation of a certain ritual. In other words, it had become the battlefield of the Holy Grail War. The land where all sorts of lives and deaths, miracles and ruinations, had been repeated over the course of the five repetitions of the ritual.

But several years had passed since the fifth Holy Grail War, and Fuyuki was wrapped in an atmosphere of genuine peace, far from its savagery. Then again, that was probably just on the surface...

But at the very least, the high school students who busied themselves with club activities were relaxed enough to enjoy idle banter during their breaks.

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Homurahara Academy. In front of the archery dojo.

It was a short time after school. The members of the archery club were whiling away their break with childish gossip.

"...I'm telling you, it's true. A long time ago a ghost in a kimono used to show up at Ryūdō Temple!"

"News to me. 'A long time ago'... You mean it's gone now?"

"Yeah, I hear even people with a spirit sense or whatever can't see a thing."

"Did it pass on?"

"Well, it is a temple."

"Speaking of which, wasn't there a rumor that there's an alligator snapping turtle in the temple pond?"



## *Interlude*

As they continued to trade stories that toed the line between urban legends and idle gossip, one girl brought up a local ghost story of recent date.

“Hey, do you know ‘The Red Riding Hood of Semina Apartments’?”

“That ghost story of Mitsuzuri’s?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Oh, were you there when she told it?”

Then the confused underclassmen cut into their seniors’ conversation.

“Oh, I don’t know that one.”

“Mitsuzuri? You mean the OB who drops by to hang out once in a while?”

The upperclassman who had introduced the topic then began to tell the “ghost story” with apparent relish.

“Yeah, it’s a ghost story she told me. You know how there’s a place called Semina Apartments in Kurokizaka, over in New City?”

Soon, however, she wiped the smile from her face, and continued in a hushed tone. Because she knew. Knew that that ghost story was tied to an actual double suicide that had taken place just a few years before.

“This is just a rumor that spread from those apartments, but...”

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The urban legend, when told without its ghost story embellishments, was actually quite simple.

A married couple moved into the Semina Apartments in Kurokizaka. They had a daughter, who was constantly abused. A little girl who always wore a red hood.

Their neighbor, “A,” noticed the girl’s situation, but ignored it as none of his business. Their relationship was far from intimate; it consisted entirely of the girl, who could no longer raise her arms due to the abuse she had suffered, asking him to “push the button” in the elevator. To the young girl, however, the neighbor who pushed the button for her probably seemed far more dependable than her parents. And so...

When the girl’s mother tried to force double suicide on her, she fled all covered in blood, sought help from her neighbor. She knocked on his door over and over again, hoping to be saved. “A,” however, thought it was probably just the usual abuse, and ignored it.

It’s somebody else’s problem, he thought.

It’s got nothing to do with me, he thought.

No matter how many times she beat on his door, he continued to ignore it.

As far as the runaway girl was concerned, there was no one for her to turn to but “A.” “A,” however, turned away from the girl’s heartbroken cries — from the girl’s life. He turned up the

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volume on his television and shut himself up in his own little world. After all, it was somebody else's problem.

Thus, the little girl was betrayed by the person she had trusted most.

The next day, the corpses of the couple were discovered, but, for some reason, the girl's whereabouts remained unknown. She had suddenly disappeared, leaving behind only the marks of blood loss so copious she could not possibly have survived.

The sounds of abuse from the next door apartment were no more, but in their place a late night knocking sound came to trouble "A." Then, one night, when he could bear it no longer, "A" opened the door, and there stood a girl in a red hood. With a bloody face, she said:

"Come on, push the button."

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"...And that's the story!"

The girl finished telling the tale roughly as she remembered it. A babble of exasperated voices broke out from the other club members beside her.

"...It's not even scary when you tell it."

"I guess even when the story's the same, it loses a lot with a different teller..."

"How bad you are at telling it is the scariest part, if you ask me."

The storyteller, getting a round of boos from her classmates who knew the story, waved her hands in protest.

"I told you I couldn't do it like Mitsuzuri! She really pulls you into the story."

"Yeah, the way she set the stage with the long hallway and stuff was amazing... Wait a minute, when he opened the door Red Riding Hood wasn't there at first! She was standing in the long hallway when he turned around!"

"Is that how it went?"

"It was! And you skipped over all kinds of other stuff, too! Like how A liked being alone, and his back and forth with the detective... Aargh! The double suicide really happened, and even that sounds fake when you tell it."

Following that speech, other club members began to join the conversation one after another.

"That was thoughtless. Of course, so is turning a real incident like that into a ghost story."

"Wait, the double suicide really happened?"

"Now that you mention it, there were all sorts of other weird rumors going around, weren't there?"

The underclassmen, who had gotten all worked up to hear the ghost story for the first time,

only to be told a half-baked version, began to express their dissatisfaction.

“I wish I’d heard it from that OB instead.”

“Yeah, it’s like you just went and blurted out the punch line. It’s the worst.”

The storyteller answered them, cackling:

“Wow. Well, she won’t be telling you here, at least.”

“What?”

“Her ghost stories were expressly forbidden by Tiger for being ‘too scary.’ Tiger can’t deal with them, you know? Ghost stories.”

“Now that you mention it, I’ve heard that someone in the track and field club banned scary stories as well... I think that was because one of the seniors was a huge coward, too.”

“Tiger’s usually fearless, but I guess she’s got some weird mental weaknesses.”

Just as they uttered the nickname of the woman teacher who acted as advisor to the archery club, a distant voice boomed, “Hey! Break time’s over!”

“Woah, speak of the devil. It’s Ms. Fujimura.”

“That time already?”

“The ghost story used up our break time...”

With a feeling like indigestion, the students rose to resume club activities. As they began getting ready, the remains of the break time conversation were dragged on another few words.

“...What happened to A in the end, again?” the storyteller surreptitiously enquired of a classmate, possibly ashamed of her own vague recollection.

“They disappeared, right?” came the careless reply, followed by a light — albeit indiscreet — joke.

“I bet he’s still running from Red Riding Hood, even now.”

It was the kind of ghost story you might hear anywhere. Common gossip whispered among the young people of Fuyuki.

But the story had a sequel that the rumors did not tell. The continuation of the urban legend was to be spun in a far off foreign land.

“The Red Riding Hood of Semina Apartments.”

It’s protagonist had been caught up in something far more preposterous than any wild rumor...

A Holy Grail War full of lies.



## Chapter 2

### “The Heroic Spirit Incident”

## **Chapter 2: Day 0, Midnight**

### The Heroic Spirit Incident

Somewhere.

“Oh, so that’s where you are. You just had to turn up there, of all places, my little sacrificial pawn.”

In the darkness, Francesca slumped her shoulders with an air of boredom, and watched the scene reflected in her crystal ball. It was an image of the old Snowfield opera house.

“I mean really, the Heroic Spirit summoned there is sure to be Art.”

In the image, she could see the figure of a lone girl stealthily creeping into the opera house.

“I wish you’d gone to Sigma’s place. They have a strong uncertainty factor, and the synergy would have made thing much more interesting,” the girl dressed in gothic lolita clothes grumbled to herself, then immediately regained her smile as she continued:

“Well, maybe it’s for the best. I just had an idea for a fun game.”

She contacted someone with magecraft, then returned her attention to the crystal. She had been staring listlessly at it in the dark for about ten minutes, when—

A powerful light shone from the crystal. That moment, she noticed a peculiarity in the image that made her eyes sparkle.

“Oh? What’s this? Now who could that be? Assassin, perhaps?”

The words were barely out of her mouth when another change came over the image. Francesca stared excitedly at the “corpse” in the crystal ball and let out a cackling laugh.

“Ah ha ha! Amazing! Stupendous! A sudden accident! I wonder what will happen next!”

Francesca flashed an ecstatic grin, her cheeks flushing obscenely while her eyes sparkled like a child’s.

“Oh! Oh, Art, whatever will you do now? Your Master dead the moment you’re summoned! Isn’t it dramatic?”

She shouted wildly, and all the while she laughed, laughed, laughed—

Catching sight of the next thing reflected in the crystal ball, she cocked her head limply to one side, still smiling.

“...What’s this?”

Then, her head full of question marks, she muttered:

“Who is... that Saber?”

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America. Snowfield.

Inside the partially-collapsed opera house, Ayaka Sajou was cursing her fate.

She could not help it, even if she had brought it on herself.

Because the circumstances she now found herself in seemed like nothing but some god or devil's prank.

Lying beside her was a human corpse.

There was no external wound, but the man's body was stiff, with a look of anguish as if his heart had been crushed. She could not detect the least sign of life.

To Ayaka's eyes, it had appeared that a hand really had crushed his heart. but... that heart was gone now, and there was no trace of a tear in his shirt, let alone a wound on his chest.

And the "someone" who had crushed his heart was gone as well.

She had been forced to retreat by the mysterious man who had appeared before Ayaka's eyes.

The story goes back a bit.

A few minutes ago, Ayaka was a prisoner.

She had been bound from head to toe with a magical cord belonging to what the corpse had been before it became a corpse — a mage.

"You must have taken me lightly indeed to imagine that you could hide from me like that."

The mage sounded shocked. He scrutinized Ayaka's body all over, and tilted his head.

"Those marks look like command seals... So you're the one Faldeus mentioned. What are you after?"

"...No idea. A weird white woman told me to come, so I came."

Ayaka's tone was brusque. Her eyes were brimming with resignation at the world and anger at her unreasonable situation.

The mage saw that, shrugged inwardly, and continued without apparent interest.

"I see. I suppose that makes you a poor stray mage made into a sacrificial pawn for the Einzbern 'flesh puppet'... Well, I can't have you getting in the way of the ritual. Sorry, but I'm going to deal with you first."

The mage sent mana surging through the magic circuits that crisscrossed his body, and was about to end Ayaka's life without emotion, like it was just work, when—

"...Humph."

He suddenly halted, and touched a finder to an earring which seemed to be a magical implement of some kind.

"Yes... .. This woman? Why?"



He seemed to be conversing with someone through the earring, but Ayaka of course could not hear the other side of the conversation.

“...I see. Understood. I’ll play along with your game.”

Once he had ended the call, the mage let out a big sigh, and turned back to face the still-bound Ayaka.

“It may be a mere whim, but I can’t say I’m not interested.”

“...?”

“Oh, I’m just going to see how much loyalty the Heroic Spirit I’m about to summon will swear to me.” The mage’s twisted slightly, and he stifled a chuckle as he continued. “I want to know whether or not the noble hero once hailed as the king of the Knights of the Round Table will obey an order to kill a defenseless woman.”

All Ayaka managed to understand was that she was probably going to be killed by the “noble hero” who was about to be summoned.

“And if this whatever of the Round Table refuses to kill me, I... still won’t be spared, will I?” Ayaka spoke cynically and without enthusiasm.

“I could always use a Command Seal, but unfortunately I’m not enough of a hedonist to waste one on a game. I’ll just snap your neck with that cord.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? If you don’t kill me first, I might ruin your ritual.”

“Your voice is shaking. Don’t bluff.”

The mage maintained his air of indifference in this face of Ayaka’s half-desperate sarcasm.

“Do you know why I just as good as told you the true name of the Heroic Spirit I’m going to summon?”

“...?”

“I did it because this summoning is another ‘declaration of war.’ It doesn’t matter if it gets out; on the contrary, I hear it will make for a grand irony when it gets back to the Einzberns and the Association through your employer. Totally useless, if you ask me, but I get paid all the same.”

Among mages, it was basic common sense to conceal information, but this mage only shrugged as he continued relating his commission to spread it.

“In short, we’ve already made allowances for the infiltration you gambled your life on.”

“...”

“Speaking of which, I would have liked to make sure whether or not those faux-Command Seals have the power to obstruct my summoning, but... Really, I’m sure Francesca sees us as just another one of her toys. Well, even if you do put up a fight and spoil the ritual, I still get paid. I’ll just accept that I drew the short straw and give up on the war.”

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Ayaka silently lowered her eyes, feeling the portion of the magical cord she was constricting her neck twitch.

The mage, indifferent to her condition, began to recite an incantation before the altar set on the stage.

“For elements, silver and iron. For foundation, stone and the Archduke of Contracts.”

The succession of words meant nothing to Ayaka. At the same time, it was a countdown to her death.

“For ancestor, my great master \_\_\_\_\_.”

Oh, it’s too soon.

Ayaka groaned softly, listening to the mage’s chant as though it was none of her concern. So, my dramatic escape ends in a place like this.

“For the alighting wind, a wall. The gates of the four directions close.”

Is this a simple trick of fate, or is it “her” curse?

She thought she would prefer the latter, if possible.

Well... if it is, I wonder if this will be enough to satisfy... “her.”

She thought there being a reason for it would make it all just a little more bearable.

As if running from the reality that she was about to die.

“...?”

Suddenly, she noticed. Noticed the currents of strange power that flowed through her body as the mage’s chant filled the hall. It felt like all the blood in her body had become iron, and was feeling the pull of an external magnet.

Soon, Ayaka realized that the pulsation was not in her veins, but came from five tattoos inscribed on various parts of her body.

Deep resentment, or great joy.

She hallucinated that her entire body, with the tattoos as its focal points, was emitting a cry. Little by little, the cry was growing louder, and drowning out the mage’s chant.

The mage, however, did not seem to notice the change. He was alert, keeping up a continuous flow of mana to her magical restraints, but it appeared he had no intention of interrupting his summoning ritual...

But then, even if some grand magecraft was invoked, Ayaka did not think it would bring any optimistic developments, like incapacitating the mage or automatically warping her to a safe place.

It couldn't be a self-destruct, could it?

Either way, her own death was almost certain. The fact sent a wave of fear coursing through Ayaka, and along with it a craving: "I don't want to die."

But even those feelings seemed somehow like they were happening to someone else.

I don't want to die? Why? What reason have I got to live?

Ayaka could not tell whether it was her own brain raising these doubts, or whether it was the tattoos inscribed on her arms and the curse the "white woman" had built into them making it do so. The noise of the tattoos had grown so loud it had paralyzed her basic powers of judgment. They seemed to be cheering, or screaming, as if to welcome something that was about to appear. Then, the next instant—

Corporeal "death" swept down on the opera house stage.

But not on Ayaka; behind the mage who was to have been her executioner.

"Emerge from the ring of restraint, O Guardian of the... scales...?"

How long had "it" been there? To Ayaka's eyes, at least, it looked as if it had materialized out of thin air.

A petite human figure swathed in shadow-black robes. Ayaka could see that its whole body was covered in black cloth, but she could not make out the face. All she remembered clearly was the moment a weirdly long arm stretched through a gap in the robes, and came to rest on the chest of its victim.

As soon as she saw that, Ayaka knew. Knew that the situation she now found herself in no longer belonged to the world she knew — it was on the other side of the world's shadows, invisible to the eyes of those who lead ordinary human lives. The moment she realized that, a diminutive human figure appeared in her field of view.

A young girl wearing a red hood.

Whether she was actually a phantom or a real image, Ayaka in her confusion could not tell. Why here? This building doesn't even have an... elevator.

The "thing" that had appeared on the opera house stage looked as if it was standing on the corpse. "It" faced Ayaka with an innocent smile.



Even before she realized what that smile meant, dread ran through Ayaka from head to toe.

It was hard to say which came first, the almost audible shiver than ran down Ayaka's spine, or the black-robed intruder crushing the heart-like thing that appeared in its long hand.

"Gah... bah...?"

The mage vomited blood, still not comprehending what had happened to his body. It was doubtful if he even realized who had killed him.

Ayaka was terrified of both the black-robed figure and the girl in red, but at the same time she was thinking detached, somehow impersonal thoughts, like "Oh, I'd hate it if they got the wrong idea and thought I killed him." She probably knew instinctively that she would be crushed by the fear if she did not.

The moment the mage ceased to move, the magical cord that had been binding Ayaka from head to toe crumbled away. The realization that she was free distracted her for a moment, and in that moment—

The girl in red disappeared from her view—

And the black-robed figure stood in her place.

"...!"

Her breathing stopped.

"...Are you a mage who seeks the Holy Grail?"

A mechanical enquiry.

When she heard the figure's voice, a chill so intense that what she had felt earlier could not compare shot through Ayaka like countless needles.

From the voice, Ayaka could tell that the figure was a young woman. Maybe even younger than herself. But the sense of presence the woman's body gave off was incomparably colder, sharper and more oppressive than the mage who had threatened to kill her. Even though she had never encountered this being before, there were things she felt sure of.

If I answer wrong, I'll be killed.

If I lie, I'll probably be killed too.

The woman had no intent to kill her yet. But if Ayaka made one wrong choice, she would not have time to sense that change before she ended up just like the mage whose corpse lay on the floor in front of her. Having arrived at that conclusion, Ayaka decided to give the black-robed woman an honest answer.

"I—"

Just then—

A surge of light enveloped the stage.

"!"

“!?”

The black-robed woman was on her guard and jumped back out of the light, but Ayaka, who had only just been released from her restraints, could not even stand. The best she could do was to squint in the direction the light seemed to come from.

There was a figure in the light.

Multiple human figures.

Ayaka could not believe her eyes.

The scene only lasted a few seconds, but time in that space seemed to have stopped. Several of the figures knelt on the spot... and welcomed the last, and darkest, figure to appear.

As the light faded, the multiple figures vanished before Ayaka could notice them go, and only the last and most vivid figure remained: A blond man, still young and magnificently dressed. Here and there his golden hair was broken by streaks of red, and a pair of blazing, bestial eyes were set in his beautiful face.

Just as Ayaka had been able to sense an almost palpable “death” from the black-robed woman, who now glared at the man from a short distance away, she could sense an extraordinary “heat” from the man who had appeared in the light.

The man surveyed his surroundings wide eyed, and said:

“Well now, this looks just a bit out of the common.”

After he had glanced at the mage’s corpse lying at his feet and the black-robed woman who regarded him warily... the man continued with a broad grin.

“The way you’re dressed, and the flow of ‘power’ I sensed just now... Are you a follower of the ‘Old Man of the Mountain,’ by any chance?”

“...!?”

The atmosphere instantly changed. The man’s words sounded like nonsense to Ayaka, but they seemed to strike a chord with the black-robed woman.

“Either way, as long as we both seek the Holy Grail, we must be enemies. What will you do?”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the black-robed woman sprung into action with a surge of murderous intent. It was like a shadow on the ground had leapt into the air. She bounded into the wings in a single breath, and left afterimages in her wake as she darted between the pillars that encircled the stage. When she flew past gaps in the curtains, it created the illusion that she had split into dozens of people.

“Ha ha! Magnificent! I’ve never seen anyone lighter-footed than Loxley before!”

The man, eyes sparkling like a child’s, shouted a name Ayaka did not recognize and praised

the black-robed woman as she flitted about glaring death at him.

“...”

As if she had taken his praise as a challenge, the woman leapt still faster, and then... suddenly vanished into thin air.

“She... disappeared...?” Ayaka murmured, dumbfounded, and looked up. Just then... the black-robed woman appeared from the blind spot of everyone there. She jumped out behind the man, not from above the stage, but out of the shadow he cast on the floor.

A weirdly long arm stretched from her back, and made for the center of the man’s back, just above his heart. An arm of clear death, identical to the one that had slaughtered the mage just a minute before.

But that arm never reached the man’s body. An arrow fired from nowhere sent it flying off course.

“...!?”

The black-robed woman’s eyes widened slightly in surprise. As far as she was concerned, the blow had come from a complete blind spot. For you see, that arrow had appeared suddenly at the man’s feet — indeed, from within the shadow he cast on the stage floor.

“Ha ha, being compared not to your liking? But splendid work, as always,” the aristocratic young man muttered to no one in particular, then drew his sword with a smile.

It was exquisitely wrought. Even Ayaka could tell that it was the kind of sword that royalty used. Then, still smiling, he let out a cry... and swung.

“\_\_\_\_\_calibur.”

Once again, light enveloped the interior of the opera house. It surged from the man’s mana-infused sword like a lightning strike, and made a beeline for the black-robed woman, who was beating a hasty retreat. Then—

A violent crash, followed by the sounds of something collapsing reached Ayaka’s ears. When she timidly opened her dazzled eyes, she saw... the starry sky peeking through the collapsed roof of the partially-destroyed opera house.

“...”

The man addressed the dumbstruck girl.

“I ask you, are you my Master?”

When she heard those words, Ayaka’s brain, which had not managed to keep up with the



shifting situation, finally began to regain its equilibrium.

She reconsidered her situation. It looked like the mage's "ritual" had been safely accomplished, but the results were nothing like what she had been told. According to the "white woman" who had brought her here against her will, the ritual was supposed to conjure up the ghost of an ancient hero. Something like that, anyway. The white woman had called it a "Heroic Spirit," but she had also said that there would only be one of them. So why had she been able to see multiple figures in the light earlier? Had it been the man himself who fired that arrow when he was in danger?

Ayaka's doubts came in rapid succession, but she soon ceased to care. As her head cooled, she realized the position she had been placed in, and felt nauseous.

The mage's corpse lay before her eyes. He had died. Right in front of her. Just like that.

The man looked at the corpse too, but he just tilted his head a little to one side, and addressed her again. There was no sign that it came as any particular shock.

"Be at ease, it doesn't seem any of the common people were caught up in it. On the other hand, it appears that the rebel escaped as well... Humph, she did well to get clean away from me. Still, there's no going back now."

Was a person's death normal to him? Ayaka found that hard to accept.

Oh, I see now. So this is the kind of thing that... the "white woman" wanted to make me do.

"Participate in the Holy Grail War," she said. And of course it's normal for people to die in a war.

She wondered how it had come to this. How things had ended up this way. How she had ended up leading this kind of life.

"That being the case, I ask you once again."

The man posed a question to Ayaka as she lay lamenting the past. It looked like he would not give her time to seriously reflect on how she had come to this point.

"..."

In this chaotic situation... she made up her mind about just one thing.

I can't accept any more deaths. Not even if "destiny" tries to force them on me. Not even if resisting it means dying myself. At least I'll die fighting. It's not like my life is worth anything either way.

"May I take it that you are my Master? I am, as you can see, of the Saber class. If you understand, then let us conclude our contract at once—"

"You're wrong."

Closer to half-desperate than to resolute, Ayaka wrung a cry from deep in her throat.

"Completely wrong."

“What?”

The tattoos on her body shone faintly in response to the man’s voice, and she realized that they were resonating with him. If she agreed be his master now, she would probably be able to usurp control of the Heroic Spirit, just like the “white woman” had told her she would. But she ignored the “white woman’s” designs, and glared at the man.

“I won’t... do what you people want anymore,” she declared, forcing herself not to tremble with fear, and resolved to lay down her life if she had to. “Just... leave me alone.”

Ayaka had been sure that she would be killed by the man’s sword the moment she spoke. He was different from the black-robed woman, but she could still sense the power of an extraordinary being, completely unlike an ordinary human, from the man in front of her. Normal people were probably the same as worms to him. Or so Ayaka thought.

But, contrary to her expectations, he cocked his head as if at a loss, and returned his sword to its sheath as he spoke.

“I see, so you aren’t my Master. In that case, I suppose there’s nothing to be done.”

Then he looked up at the nearly half-collapsed ceiling and heaved a sigh.

“Is this a theater? Oh dear...”

He narrowed his eyes as if he had received a shock of some kind, and crossed his arms as if lost in thought.

“So modern playhouses are as fragile as that... I suppose the knowledge I got from the Throne isn’t enough to really understand...”

Muttering to himself, the man vanished into the wings of the stage.

Ayaka, who had been left behind, let her mouth hang open for a few seconds before a sudden realization struck her.

“I’m... saved?”

But the thought only lasted a brief time...

“Freeze!”

A man’s angry shout came from one of the entrances.

It was a different man from before, but Ayaka was able to identify him at once.

The men who appeared from the entrance were wearing matching outfits — police uniforms — and aiming riot control Taser guns at Ayaka. They had not drawn their handguns even though the area was deserted, perhaps because one glance told them that Ayaka was unarmed.

“Put both hands behind your head and get down on the floor! Slowly!”

“...Yes, sir,” Ayaka replied unenthusiastically, and slowly did as she was told.

I’m obviously the victim here, she thought. But when she considered that she was a trespasser at the scene of what looked like a terrorist bombing, well, it was probably a natural reaction.

And on top of that the mage's corpse was still lying beside her, and the suspicious altar he had used remained on the stage.

Ayaka thought that this looked like it would turn out to be quite the tangled mess, when a thought that it would be difficult for anyone else to understand suddenly crossed her mind.

Police stations... have elevators, don't they? Oh, how depressing.

Actually, I might die from the "white woman's" curse before it comes to that.

While Ayaka was lost in thought, the police officers surrounded her and confirmed that the mage beside her was dead.

"Hey! Did you do this?"

"No, no. I'm the victim here," Ayaka answered in fluent English. The officer pinning her arms responded.

"If that's true, then what happened here? Why are you in the opera house while it's closed for renovation?"

"Umm... Well, you see..."

Ayaka considered lying that she had been abducted by the mage, but she would soon be exposed if they checked the local surveillance cameras, and that would only make things even more confused. But she could not tell the truth, either.

The police officers seemed to have concluded that Ayaka's reluctance to speak was indeed suspicious, and one of them produced a pair of handcuffs.

"You are under arrest for trespassing, and suspected terrorism and destruction of property. You have the right to remain..."

Wow, they actually say it.

Ayaka found herself thinking as she listened to the Miranda warning she had often seen in American TV shows. She did not know what would happen next. She was prepared to die, but she could not accept dying while still falsely accused of the mage's murder and the destruction of the opera house. She was still lying face-down on the floor as she pondered, and when she opened her eyes... there "she" was again.

A young girl wearing a red hood.

The police officers did not seem to be able to see her. They passed back and forth through the area where she stood without comment.

The red hood was pulled far forward, and Ayaka could not make out anything from the nose up. But the girl was looking at her, and smiling faintly. She opened her mouth to say something.

Ayaka did not want to listen. She did not want to see any more. But still she could not look away.

Ayaka knew why. This was a self-inflicted curse, and it had bound her for years.



The girl in the red hood was trying to tell her something, when...

“Wait.”

A commanding voice reverberated through the opera house. At the same time, the girl in the red hood vanished.

When Ayaka and the police officers turned to look in the direction of the voice, they saw a man resplendent in noble garb standing among the solitary VIP seats in a portion of the third floor that had escaped collapse.

Huh? That’s...

Why is he still here?

Ayaka wondered, but the man faced Ayaka and the officers, and unilaterally declared:

“I will give testimony. It was not that bespectacled girl who killed the man.”

“Who’s there? Don’t move!”

Maybe it was a matter of distance. It was not Tasers that the police officers trained on the man as they shouted, but handguns. The man, however, gave no indication that he cared, and continued to majestically deliver his speech.

“Incidentally, it was not she who destroyed this theater, either.”

“What?”

“I did it, with this sword.”

The man audibly slapped the scabbard of the sword hanging at his waist as he spoke. The police officers scowled. They signaled to each other with their eyes, and several ran off towards the VIP seats where the man was. They did not seem to believe the story that he had done it with the sword, but they did appear to be wary of this man who had named himself the culprit.

“Be careful, he may have planted more bombs.”

The man seemed to have heard the officers’ whispers, because he began to sound annoyed.

“I would prefer not to be lumped in with bombs and... Hm?”

He broke off in mid-sentence. Part of the half-destroyed ceiling had begun to collapse again.

“Look out...” Ayaka mumbled instinctively.

The officers noticed it as well and tried to run, but it did not look like several of them would make it in time.

Then the man in the VIP seats laid a hand on the sword at his hip, and drew it in a motion reminiscent of Japanese Iai.

The power could hardly compare to his earlier strike, but a streak of light nevertheless extended from the blade and smashed the chunk of falling stone to atoms.

Both the police officers who had been saved by a hair’s breadth without understand what had happened, and those who been powerless to do anything from their places of safety were left

blinking in amazement.

The man who had accomplished this feat addressed the stunned officers with a regal bearing. As he spoke, he turned his gaze on Ayaka for just a moment, and flashed her a little smile.

“Will this be enough to prove me guilty?”

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The same time. West Snowfield, in the forest.

“...I sense a strange presence.”

Enkidu, the Lancer Heroic Spirit, who had spent a day with the silver wolf who was his Master turning the forest into a Bounded Field, sensed a disturbance in mana flowing from the city, and muttered wonderingly.

“Seven souls in service around one powerful one. And another strange soul beside them. I wonder what they could be.”

The silver wolf appeared to intuit Enkidu’s tension, and let out an uneasy whine.

Enkidu replied in a soothing voice while stroking his Master’s back.

“It’s alright. I won’t go anywhere tonight.

“I have preparation of my own to make so that I can face Gil at the end with my full power.”

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In front of the opera house.

“We’re coming to you live from the city center, where part of the opera house has just collapsed. What can have happened to this historic building, which boasts more than fifty years of tradition?”

A reporter for Snowfield’s local cable TV station was keeping up a live commentary in front of the partially-destroyed opera house. The reporter, having already interviewed several people, called out to a nearby young man.

“Excuse me, can I have a moment? Do you know what happened here?”

“Huh? Am I on TV? Oh wow, I wonder if the professor or Reines are watching!”

The young man in question wore a steampunk-styled wristwatch.

“Are you a local?”

“Oh, no! I just happened to be here sightseeing, and... Umm, I don’t know what happened either, but when I was going to bed my heart suddenly went crazy, and when I looked towards

the opera house, there was a big boom, and the wall started crumbling just like that!”

“Your heart went crazy?”

“Yeah, it was, umm... a hunch! That’s it!”

The reporter turned a suspicious eye on the young man, who acted like he was hiding something, but just then... they sensed movement in the direction of the opera house, softly thanked the young man, and ran off without pressing him further.

“The police officers who entered the building have just come out! The police have someone in custody! Could it be that the opera house explosion was no accident, but a deliberate plot?”

The TV camera was filming the group that emerged from the scene, and broadcasting the image live to televisions all across Snowfield. The image of the youth in an anachronistic costume who came out handcuffed by the police.

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The same time. Northwest Snowfield. Coalsman Special Corrections Center.

“Good grief, this has gotten to be a real nuisance. I mean, trouble at the summoning of the all-important Saber... This is supposed to fall under Ms. Francesca’s jurisdiction; perhaps her bad habit has reared its head again.”

Faldeus heaved a sigh, but then began to contact various locations, as if to say that this degree of trouble was within expectations.

“It’s me. The incident at the opera house is to be reported as an accident. Some paints used in the renovation caught fire, and...”

He had gotten that far when his words abruptly trailed off.

“...Excuse me. I’ll be in touch again later.”

He ended the call and turned his gaze to one of his banks of countless monitors, a screen that displayed the local cable broadcast.

When he saw what was being shown, he initially wondered if a hostile mage might not be showing him some sort of illusion. Any mage well-versed in the Holy Grail War would probably have harbored the same doubt. After all, local cable station it might be, but... a genuine Heroic Spirit was being shown on live television broadcast.

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In front of the opera house.

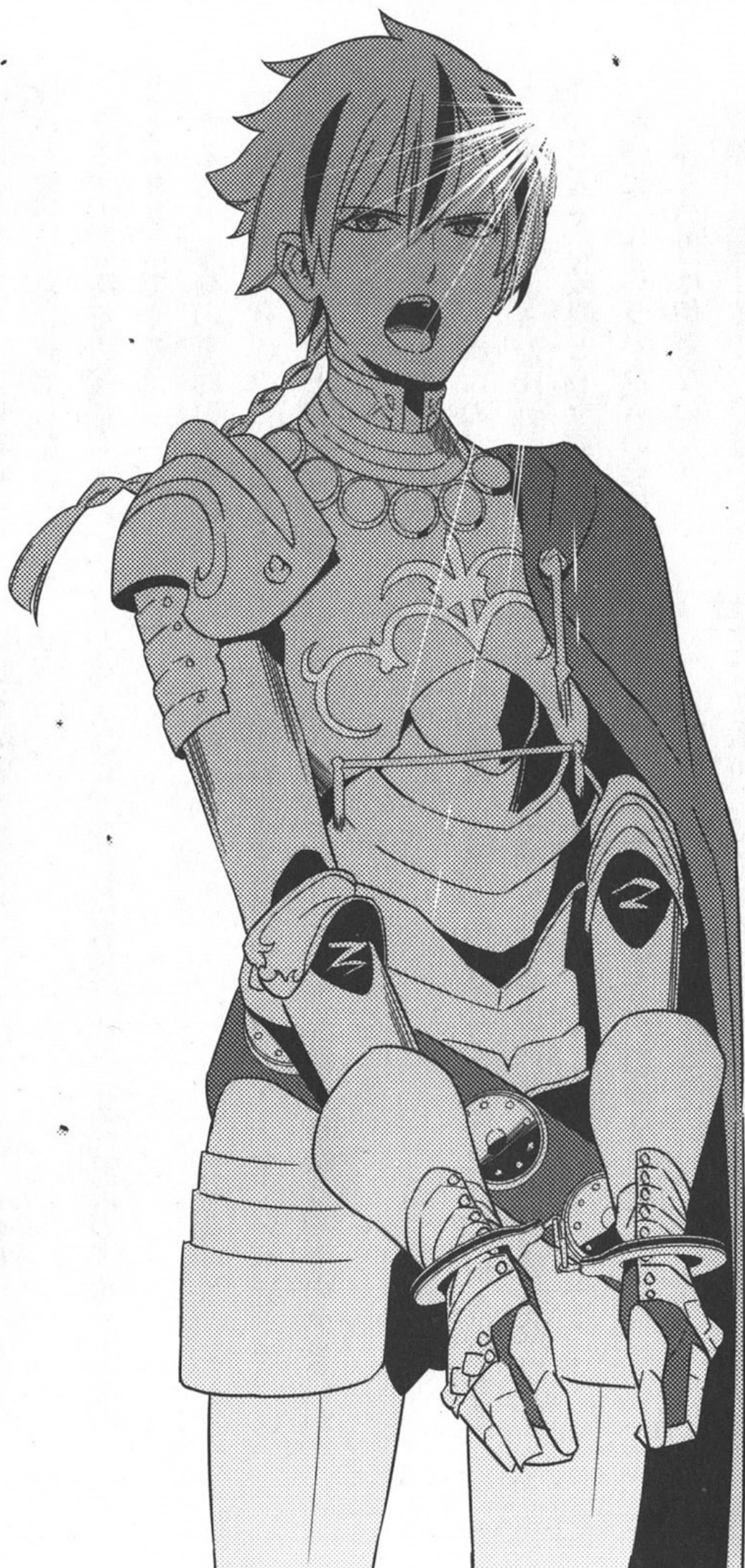
The buzzing crowd of onlookers turned to look at each other when they caught sight of the youth's anachronistic appearance. To all appearances, it was the costume of an actor who had been preparing for a performance. Maybe gas or something had exploded during a rehearsal? When they considered the incident with the desert pipeline that had been reported that morning, many of the onlookers were still inclined to think it an accident. Even the reporter was beginning to think that maybe it had not been a crime after all, but some mishap during the renovation.

However...

The man being led by the police suddenly leapt forward — still handcuffed — and reached the top of the tallest vehicle there, a fire-engine, in a mere few bounds.

The crowd was taken aback by the fact that the man had dashed up the engine without using his hands at all, relying only on the strength of his legs. The flustered police officers pointed Tasers at him. And amid the noise and tumult...

“Hear me, people of Snowfield!”



The man's voice carried strangely far.

"Having destroyed your theater, a sacred place in which to recite poetry and perform tales, We are overcome with shame. Everything is due to Our negligence. We will make no excuse."

Like a direct jolt to the brain, the meaning of the words easily penetrated the minds of all who heard them. Almost like a magical covenant.

"But in lieu of explanation, We will make you a promise! We swear by the great ancestor of Our chivalry, Arthur Pendragon, and by the great knights the songs of whose victories resound in Our native land that, on Our honor, We will compensate you for the destruction of this theater!"

The townspeople listened in awed silence.

It could hardly be called a speech; it had not even filled thirty seconds. When they considered only the meaning of the words, they were inclined to laugh it off as nonsense. But coming from the man's mouth, those words were accompanied by an mysterious ring of truth that shook the ears and hearts of the crowd.

Could he really repay them for the opera house?

Just who was this man?

"Thank you for your courteous attention! We pray that your lives will be full of most excellent song!"

Doubtful silence reigned. Having said his piece, the man dismounted the fire-engine contentedly. Then, just like that, he was bundled into a patrol car and taken away. No one spoke. Everyone was overwhelmed by the atmosphere the man had projected.

Except for one person, the young man who had been interviewed earlier. He turned to the watch on his arm, eyes shining, and clapped as he whispered:

"Amazing! Cool! I bet he's the king of someplace! Talk about charisma! Oh, Jack, I've got it! Let's make it so you were really the king of someplace too!"

"Well, there are certainly numerous theories that I was actually royalty, but... is that really what we should be thinking about after our first sight of a Heroic Spirit, one of our enemies, in the flesh? I have a feeling that he left several clues to his true name just now. King Arthur and so on?"

"Oh no, it will be so much more fun and exciting to find out who he is later! I know, let's not fight him and make friends instead. I mean, he's so cool."

"I have grown genuinely uneasy about whether you understand the meaning of the Holy Grail War."



While the pair of Heroic Spirit and Master conversed, a bespectacled female inconspicuously emerged, still not handcuffed, and was made to board a patrol car. The onlookers' heads were still full of the man who had appeared shortly before, and most failed to notice her. Only that young Master, Flat Escardos, displayed an unusual reaction.

"Huh?"

"Is something the matter?"

"No, that person just now... Maybe it was just my imagination."

Flat looked after the patrol car, head tilted to one side, and maintained that attitude as he resumed his telepathic conversation with the Heroic Spirit.

Well, I say telepathy, but Flat was actually speaking out loud, and so came to be regarded by the other onlookers as "a dangerous guy who gets worked up and talks to himself."

Thus, although it was a matter of only a few minutes, to the citizens of Snowfield, the "mystery man's speech" was an unforgettable event, not only to the onlookers who were at the scene, but also to those who had heard his voice over the local cable station.

And to the mages who had been peering through familiars and surveillance cameras as well.

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The same time. Northwest Snowfield. Coalsman Special Corrections Center.

"Good grief. This is more than just unexpected."

Faced with a worrisome situation, Faldeus — one of the driving forces behind the "Fake Holy Grail War" — shook his head and sighed.

"So much for aiding and abetting their escape. He was supposed to learn about the secrecy of magecraft from the Grail as soon as he was summoned..."

Watching the cable broadcast and the footage transmitted to him through familiars at the same time, Faldeus was at his wit's end.

"We were fully prepared to make enemies of the Association and the Church, and we spread the word to the mages, but... who could have imagined a Heroic Spirit would go on TV and promise reparations to ordinary citizens?" Faldeus grumbled, seemingly to his subordinate Aludra, who was beside him, and gave a little shake of his head.

He could only sense the man's presence through familiars, but he was unmistakably a Heroic Spirit.

“If he’d assumed spirit form the police wouldn’t have been able to see him, much less handcuff him. What the hell is he thinking...?”

Faldeus then turned his attention to the bespectacled woman who had quietly emerged after the man.

“...The tattooed woman.”

It was the woman who had arrived in town half a day before. The one tattooed with designs that resembled Command Seals.

“Still, I’m sure I reported to Ms. Francesca that she was heading for the opera house.”

A number of misgivings occurred to Faldeus as he sighed and wondered what he had bothered raising the surveillance level for.

What if allowing herself to get arrested by the police is part of this woman’s plan?

What had happened to Cashura, the mage in charge of Saber? Taken out? By that woman?

Is it possible that she suspects the police station is in league with us, and is using this to get her Heroic Spirit inside?

No, even if she is, there has to be some other way.

The questions were endless, but Faldeus judged that pondering them now would produce no answers.

“...Is this still within your calculations, then, Ms. Francesca?” he muttered, staring vexedly up at the ceiling.

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Somewhere.

“Oh, honestly! It’s inconceivable! Unexpected! Completely unforeseen! But I suppose it’s things like this that make life worth living! What fun! Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

Francesca was alone in the dark room, rolling with laughter.

“Hee hee, ha ha ha ha! Hyah ha ha! Oh, oh, no more! It’s too good! My spleen and bile ducts will get all twisted up!”

She lay face-up, flapping her feet with a heartfelt smile. All the while Francesca was shouting, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Ah! Ah! I’ve watched so many Grail Wars, but even I’ve never seen a Servant get arrested by the police before! I don’t know why Art didn’t show even though we used that medium, but I don’t even care anymore!”

She went on laughing for about another three minutes. After that she staggered to her feet,

wiping the tears from her eyes, and turned her gaze to the crystal ball. Reflected in it was a scene of that Saber being made to get out of the patrol car and taken inside the police station.

“Oh, I see. So that’s how it is,” Francesca went on happily talking to herself, nodding in apparent agreement with something. “The other Master’s must at least know that there’s a Heroic Spirit in the station now, so they’ll all be gunning for the police! Oh, how dreadful! I’ll be snacking and cheering you on from here, so do your best, Mr. Police Chief!”

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The Same time. The Police Station.

“That’s... King Arthur?”

The chief of police, Orlando Reeve, spread his office blinds with his fingers and peered out at the parking lot. He saw that the Heroic Spirit — apparently Saber — was walking to majestically for someone being “hailed in,” and sighed with his usual sour look.

“I see we didn’t send out Clan Calatin in time.”

“It happened in the city center. Apparently some officers on patrol rushed in before they could take care of it,” his secretary reported coolly. When she had finished, she asked the chief about future developments.

“How do we proceed? Deal with them inside the station?”

“Assemble the members of Clan Calatin here... but first, investigate the woman who was brought in. Find out if she’s a Master or not. Depending on the circumstances, we may be able to form an alliance.”

“An alliance, sir?”

“If the what Francesca told us is correct, that should be King Arthur, but... On TV, he swore ‘by Arthur Pendragon,’ didn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. We have also received a report to that effect from the officers who were at the scene.”

“In that case, doesn’t swearing by yourself sound strange to you? He could always be some hero linked to Arthur — a knight of the Round Table — but wherever he comes from, we can’t expect to challenge Saber and come out unscathed. If he manages to fire his Noble Phantasm even once in the time between our taking care of his Master and him disappearing, it will mean trouble.”

The chief clasped his hands over his desk, concealing his mouth as he continued:

“To begin with, if that woman is enough of a mage to steal the right to be Saber’s Master, it’s only natural for her to have some kind of plan.”

“I don’t know about that, sir. It’s also possible that she is an amateur and only knows the rudiments of magecraft.”

“A puppet of the Einzberns?”

The preceding evening they had received a report that an Einzbern homunculus had entered the city. Faldeus and Francesca were probably aware of it as well, but the chief had not yet exchanged information with them on that point.

But even if the Einzberns were making no direct moves, it was a real possibility that they were employing some outside mage. If they feared betrayal, they could always find some means of manipulating an amateur who merely possessed magic circuits to do their bidding.

“Also consider the possibility that Francesca, not the Einzberns, is behind her. That woman would betray us in five seconds if she thought it would be fun. Faldeus is allied with us, but even he could easily turn on us depending on the inclination of his superiors.”

The chief continued with slightly downcast eyes, recalling the clash of Heroic Spirits in the desert, and the gigantic crater that had been born as a result.

“In any case, as long as we have not only Gilgamesh, but another Heroic Spirit capable of facing him on equal footing to deal with, we can’t have too much insurance.”

Then, looking to the future looking to the future from the dual standpoints of police chief and Master, Orlando dispassionately issued instructions to his secretary:

“Keep a watchful eye on both the woman and the Heroic Spirit. For the time being, choose detectives who don’t know the circumstances, and treat them as strangely-dressed suspects in a possible terrorism case.”

Lastly, he added the most personally important of his instructions:

“...Don’t neglect Caster’s surveillance. You know what he’s like; if he hears about this, he’s entirely capable of trying to take over the investigation himself.”

“Actually, there was a request from Mr. Caster a little while ago. ‘Let me play in the casino,’ again.”

“Denied. See to it that his meals meet his demands, and nothing else.”

The chief replied immediately to his secretary’s matter-of-fact report, his face still expressionless. As she departed, he muttered exasperatedly, fingers on his temples.

“Good lord... What kind of Heroic Spirit goes to a casino when there’s a war on?”

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Snowfield. Crystal Hill Casino Hotel.

Crystal Hill was the tallest building in Snowfield. It was also a first-class hotel, and home to the largest casino in the city. It was said that the breadth and luxury of its facilities were a match for even the finest Las Vegas casinos.

Of course, true gambling enthusiasts still tended to head for Las Vegas across the desert to Snowfield's south, so it hardly attracted many visitors from abroad. Even so, the millionaires who congregated in the young boom town loved it well enough, and Snowfield's largest entertainment facility, Crystal Hill was majestically enshrined in the city center.

In a corner of that casino, a grand wager was about to unfold. Although, as far as the one betting was concerned, it was a mere diversion.

"Everything on red."

At the carelessly spoken words, a mountain of chips were moved onto the roulette table. A quiet stir ran through the expensively-dressed people around it, and turned to see who had placed such an extravagant wager.

The man in the center of their gazes — Gilgamesh, the Archer Heroic Spirit — sat in his chair at the roulette table, plain for all to see. He did not even seem to be particularly enjoying himself. Though he sat gracefully, the piercing look in his eyes seemed to appraise the dealer's skill. He looked less like a first-class gambler than he did the owner of the casino. Unusually, his hair was slicked down, and he wore not his golden armor, but a suit in a flashy cut.

Gilgamesh, who had no sooner arrived at the casino than he had racked up a string of big wins, naturally attracted stares. He was now dealing in sums that would give even a minor millionaire pause.

Before long, cheers and applause broke out as the roulette ball landed on a red number. The corners of Gilgamesh's mouth turned up slightly, but his improved spirits seemed to be purely in response to admiration, rather than to having just made a large profit. He casually grasped a handful of the highest value chips he had acquired and rose from his seat, leaving a sum almost fifty times the winnings of the average gambler behind him. He accepted a cocktail glass from a passing waitress, and swished the drink in his mouth as he made his way to a more sparsely populated area.

"...Hardly fit to drink," he muttered to himself.

I'm sorry, a girl's voice sounded inside his head.

"You have no reason to apologize," Gilgamesh, still holding the cocktail in his mouth, replied telepathically.

Standing motionless beside him was Tine Chelk, his Master. Persons under twenty-one years

of age were forbidden from entering casinos in this state, and violations carried harsh penalties for the offending casino. Yet no one questioned Tine's presence. No one so much as looked in her direction.

"Well? No one should be able to see you."

Maybe because there was no one nearby, or maybe because telepathy simply was not to his liking, Gilgamesh spoke aloud except when sipping his drink.

...Yes, Your Majesty. The blessings of this ring are truly wonderful.

On her finger, Tine wore a ring engraved with the script of ancient Sumer.

"It's nothing grand enough to call a blessing. Merely a trinket that wards off prying eyes. The mongrel rabble is one thing, but it is not powerful enough to deceive the eyes of a mage or a Servant."

For about half a day after making the gigantic crater in the desert, Gilgamesh had gone off somewhere with a parting, "At least defend yourself on your own."

Tine could sense the mana that linked them, so she had known that he had not vanished or dissolved their contract, but she had not had the slightest idea what he was doing. Once night fell, Tine and the others who had been with her on the north side of town had returned to the headquarters of the Protectors of the Land, and there he had been, having procured civilian clothes from somewhere and wearing an expression of apparent ill-humor beneath his slicked-down bangs.

"Show me the place in this city where the most people and riches gather."

As a result, Tine had ended up taking Gilgamesh to Crystal Hill, the city's number one casino, and to the entertainment district that surrounded it. She could not fathom his intentions, but she had no reason to disobey. The city center could be called her enemies' base, and if she was an ordinary mage, she might have hesitated to go there. But while Tine understood the situation, she felt little unease. She had complete faith in the power Gilgamesh had displayed in the desert the previous night. So much so that she worried more that she might become a hindrance to him.

Then, when Tine had been stopped by the clerk in charge at the entrance of the casino, Gilgamesh had handed her that ring.

"If someone can see you, it means that they possess considerable powers of observation. I leave the treatment of any except thieves with their eyes on the Grail for you, my Master, to decide. They are none of my concern."

...Understood.

Tine bobbed her head respectfully, then addressed Gilgamesh concerning his recent exploits. Still, the skill you have displayed this past hour has been truly magnificent.

“Skill has nothing to do with it. All the riches of my garden return to me in the end. To me, gambling is the same as shifting money from my treasury to my purse. The act may be meaningful, but it is not a game to take pleasure in,” Gilgamesh answered with a look of boredom, flipping the valuable chips he held into the air as he spoke. The Heroic Spirit in modern dress surveyed his surroundings afresh as he continued:

“But... this is the greatest flow of wealth this city has to offer?”

I judged that the banks and stock exchange would not present the sights Your Majesty desired, and excluded them.

“I see. Still, it will do. This amusement center exchanges one currency for another, building a world of its own.”

A world?

“Yes. Money is the ultimate invention, a spell that has brought maturation and decadence to the mongrels at the same time. I do not despise it myself. It is such a fine thing, and yet its greatest use is ‘waste’ — comical.”

Gilgamesh shrugged his shoulders and laughed as he spoke. It appeared that this Heroic Spirit had a fondness for luxury. Even his present attire exuded an aura best summed up by the phrase “a youngster who’s gotten his hands on a fortune he couldn’t use up in Vegas and gotten carried away.”

In contrast to Gilgamesh, who seemed strangely at home, Tine had naturally never set foot in a casino before. She was uneasily surveying her surroundings when his voice sounded in her ear.

“No woman who would use my power should quail at anything but me.”

I’m sorry.

“I’m certain I told you already — Children should act like children, bright-eyed at whatever meets their gaze. Of course, all the world must appear dim in my presence.”

As Your Majesty says.

Unable to tell if Gilgamesh was joking or in earnest, Tine merely bowed her head.

Gilgamesh, seeing that, narrowed his eyes in apparent displeasure.

“I do not mind you showing me deference. It is only natural. But do not put faith in me blindly. If your eyes can shine, use them to see your way.”

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“No, not only me. Be it ‘God,’ or this ‘Nature’s blessing’ you speak of, or the cherished wish of generations of ancestors, it makes no difference. Abandoning thought to revere or depend on something means letting your soul fall into decay. An insolent one who would bluntly try to make a stepping stone of me, though unpleasant, would still be a worthier partner.”

When he got to “the cherished wish of generations of ancestors,” Tine realized that she herself was being indicated, and stiffened. Gilgamesh emptied his glass as he questioned her.

“Which are you, mongrel girl? Is retaking this land from the mages your will? Or do you speak as another’s puppet, abandoning choice and making fate your excuse?”

...!

“As long as my friend is here, I intend to amuse myself with the jest, this ‘Holy Grail War.’ If you do cast aside your childishness and try to make use of me, you must be prepared to bare your true character.”

I... I...

That was as far as Tine managed to get in her telepathic response. She did not have an answer to Gilgamesh’s question, at least not now.

She was prepared to risk her life.

She was also prepared to kill. She already had blood on her hands.

But whether that was her own will, or whether she was being swept along by the muddy stream of fate, even she did not know. She had never seriously considered the question until Gilgamesh had asked her.

“Well, no matter. Many of the people of Uruk were emotionally mature by your age, but I cannot expect as much of the mongrels of this era.”

It looked as if Gilgamesh had not really wanted an answer, and he did not force Tine to continue the conversation. After one final remark, he directed his steps towards another gambling table.

“Those who offer up their souls to something of their own firm will, however, I commend.”

Perhaps he was remembering someone in particular. A somehow nostalgic smile played across his lips.

“Even if they are the sort the mongrels call mad.”

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Somewhere in the city. Inside a building under construction.

The partially-constructed building stood on a site slightly removed from central Snowfield. Under normal circumstances it would be deserted at night, after the construction people had gone. Now, however, a black-robed woman — the Servant Assassin — had erected her barrier there, and ordinary humans could no longer so much as perceive the entrance.

As she rested her body, the woman Assassin silently closed her eyes and clenched her teeth.



Although she had been caught up in Saber's powerful strike, there was not a single wound on her. Perhaps she had employed some kind of secret technique.

Nonetheless, she still knew neither her opponent's fighting strength, nor his Noble Phantasm, nor even his true name. Her temporary withdrawal had probably been tactically correct. Yet the fact that she had retreated in the face of the enemy at all had sunk her heart into a deep abyss.

That man had known about the "Old Man of the Mountain."

Who is he? How much does he know of the techniques of the great chiefs?

He is among those led astray by the Holy Grail. That much is certain.

I must think of a plan for dealing with him.

If that Saber had been a man whose only skill was unleashing those powerful slashes of light, she could deal with him as things stood by making liberal use of her own Noble Phantasm. The possibility of using up her mana and vanishing as a result would be high, but she would have no regrets about that. She had not yet noticed the flow of mana that still linked her to her Master.

The woman Assassin cemented her resolve as she devised countermeasures for the man. She sensed an air of unrest ever since Saber had been summoned. Just before he appeared, there had certainly been multiple presences in the light. Some of them had been clearly inhuman. Later all the figures had coalesced into one... but there was the arrow that had knocked away the arm of her Delusional Heartbeat: Zabaniya. That Saber did not appear to have fired it. Furthermore, the arrow had been laced with a powerful poison. Because she had acquired resistance as a result of her training, it had had no effect on her, but it would have numbed the sinews of an ordinary person, rendering them immobile. The man had not seemed the type to use poison for preference, and there was still the mystery of why the arrow had flown out of his shadow. That meant she could not fight him recklessly.

Her own immaturity had prevented her from calling down inevitable death on her opponent. If one of the great chiefs had been in her position, they would surely have been able to reap the mysterious Heroic Spirit's life without raising an eyebrow. Her own inability to accomplish that was proof of her immaturity.

How should I deal with that man?

There was a Noble Phantasm related to her poison resistance — a technique of scattering poison that a chief called "The Tranquil" had once employed — but that would also effect people other than her target. In life she had ceaselessly trained herself for the duties of an assassin. But all of that was for bringing ruin to the enemies of the faith, not for massacring innocent people. There might be coreligionists of hers among those who walked the city. And even if there were not, there would be some who might one day have a change of heart and convert.

She had spent the day seeking out and challenging the many mages who had infiltrated Snowfield. As they were all clearly infidels, she had reaped the lives of any who had engaged her with murderous intent. As long as they were not involved with the Holy Grail War, the mages were not definitely marked for death, but she had no reason to overlook those who sought her life. Most of the mages who had not been hostile had no sooner learned that she was a Servant than they had begun to proposition her: "I'll manage the Command Seals somehow, so make a contract with me," "Let's go after the Grail together," "Once we have the Grail you can wish for whatever you want." She had stabbed their tongues so that they would not be able to speak such depravities for a while. When it came to mages who had only come to enjoy the spectacle, she had simply left them with the warning, "The ritual in this city is a heresy against nature; have nothing to do with it." If she had had more time, she would have taken the opportunity to recommend conversion, but at present she had no such luxury.

Eliminate the ones behind this Holy Grail War. That is my only duty.

She switched her thoughts to another track, stood on the edge of the building, and flung her body high into the city night. She could still sense many mages, and they showed no sign of running out. It was her task to search out the masterminds of the Holy Grail War from among them, and give them just retribution for their slights to the chiefs.

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The same time. On a rooftop.

The woman Assassin's Master, Jester Carture, watched over her from afar, grinning ecstatically. He rattled on to himself, slowly clapping his hands.

"Ah... Magnificent! You were fully justified in your retreat, and yet you feel shame at your own immaturity. But such pride is for kings and knights to worry about, not you! Still, the sight of your shame is truly beautiful!"

Jester was among those who had observed the events in the opera house from the shadows. He had completely erased his presence and witnessed the affair from beginning to end. He could say with certainty that there was something unusual about the Heroic Spirit who appeared to be Saber. As far as Assassin's Master was concerned, she had had slim chance of victory, Nobel Phantasms excluded.

"You would almost certainly have lost in a head-to-head firefight. But not to fear; you are an assassin. Seek your opening from the shadows, and deal him certain death from behind! Upholding the honor of what you believe in through such dishonorable means is your very way of life!"

Jester described her way of fighting to suit himself, and praised her life to suit himself. He danced round and round in the darkness alone, literally jumping for joy.

“What purity! To think that there was still such a promising fruit left in the human race! All mankind should watch her life, comprehend it, sympathize with it, and learn from her example! No, I tell a lie! She is too good for mere humans! I, I alone, am fit to savor her with my eyes, to break her, and to devour her!”

Once he had finished shouting his boundless egoism, Jester surveyed the city lights that stood out in the darkness of night below him, and licked his lips with barely-suppressed excitement.

“How could I let anyone else have her? Even those fiendish Heroic Spirits in the desert, or to the new swordsman. I will permit them to torment her. By all means, make her despair. But it must be I who eats her in the end!”

At that point Jester stopped grinning for a moment, and narrowed his eyes as he turned his attention to the darkness of night itself. As if he were glaring at something human eyes could not see.

“Cursed servant of the planet. Surround the city with your burden of death if you will, but I won’t surrender that girl, even to you.”

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A dream.

Rider had no mind. A system for carrying death to humans. That was his true nature.

While his Master, Kuruoka Tsubaki, was sunk in peaceful slumber, Rider dreamed as well. A process of recalling what had transpired during the day, and sorting the information he had accumulated. There was neither desire nor regret in it. It was no more or less than data sorting for the purpose of abiding by the Holy Grail system and guarding the safety and wishes of his Master.

Almost a full day had passed since the events in the desert. The data Rider was sorting was largely the same as it had been the day before. But several “birds” now flew in the dream world, he recalled Tsubaki rejoicing at the sight of them.

“Birdies!”

“Hey, did you bring me those birdies too?”

“Thank you!”

“I love animals!”

Tsubaki’s guileless words were replayed over and over again. In the past day, that was the moment that the girl, his Master, had been most excited. That was the course his Master wished for. Having confirmed that, Rider began to do his duty.

He acted so as to ensure that, in case his interpretation turned out to differ from Tsubaki’s, he would be able to correct his course immediately. Slowly. Slowly. And so, silently, brutally... he began to spread throughout the town.

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Somewhere in the city.

Surrounded by mountains of old-looking books, Caster was resting his feet on his desk and staring at the screen of a notebook computer with an excited grin.

“Oh-ho, so when ya put the notes and lyrics into the computer, the little lady in the picture sings! Oh, what a time to be alive! The Grail War’s got nothing on this!”

He fiddled with the computer for a while, rattling on in that vein all the while. At last, a bizarre tune, such as to waste the capabilities of that sophisticated software, became audible from the computer.

“...”

Once he had listened to it all the way through, he tried listening to songs made by other people for comparison. Then he nodded as if convinced of something.

“Yeesh. My violin teacher told me back when I was a brat, but I guess I really ain’t got any musical talent. Can’t do anything about that; might as well focus on the Grail War.”

With a sigh, he switched the image on the computer screen. A stream of highly-classified information, such as would never normally be lying around on the internet, flashed across it.

[Confirmed that all birds utilized as familiars have revived from apparent death state.]

They appeared to be reports from an organization connected to Snowfield. A long succession of sentences sprinkled with mage terminology.

[Confirmed that all functionality as familiars has been lost. Abnormal spots in various places.]

[No pathogens discovered, but confirmed faint traces of magical energy possessing unusual properties, interpretable as both mana and od. Conjecture that birds we failed to recover have similarly revived.]

[Case category upgraded to C class. Future developments under the jurisdiction of Mr. Faldeus Dioland.]



Following such disquieting statements, still more bizarre documents and footage from Snowfield's local cable station appeared on the screen.

[Received information that police have secured one Heroic Spirit, thought to be Saber.]

"Haha, for real? Looks like we've got another weirdo on our hands!" Caster cackled, playing back what appeared to be a video recording.

When he saw the figure addressing the public, his eyes widened, he clapped his hands together, and rocked his chair back and forth as he shouted:

"! Looks like the station's saddled with another troublemaker!"

Then he blurted out words of compassion for his Master, mingled with sarcastic laughter.

"Too bad for the chief. Guy could get an ulcer from this."

Caster spoke as though it was all someone else's problem, and kept on talking to himself, carefree to the end, as he perused still more information.

"Now for the kickoff of a fun seven days! They say it took God that long to make the world, so let's see what these guys can whip up."

Then, just a little regretfully, but still grinning, Caster slowly shook his head from side to side.

"I'd like to at least hold out long enough to see the finale with my own eyes, but I guess I've only got seven days too."

Caster rocked his creaking chair hard and looked around at the high-piled books, flashing a self-mocking smile and laughing under his breath.

"If I was the great Shakespeare, I'd write up the story playing out in front of me, but I think I'll do my best to kick back in the gallery and enjoy the show! Smoking hot babes and tasty grub included! Haha!"

## Chapter 3

### “Ensemble Versus Illusion”

### **Chapter 3: Day 1, Early Dawn**

Ensemble Versus Illusion

Crystal Hill Casino.

“Everything on black.”

Gilgamesh was seated at the roulette table again, betting as he had earlier. He was in the process of amassing a sum that even the casino could not ignore, when a third party entered the fray.

“Me too; everything on black.”

Gilgamesh shot a sidelong glare at the man in the seat next to his, who had just placed a mountain of high value chips on the table.

“What have we here? A remora out to steal my riches?”

“Hardly. I’m not interested in the money; I just hoped I could get you to share some of your luck,” the man, who wore a gaudy eye patch, said with a broad grin. “I’ve got a big job after this, and it’ll be a real shot in the arm.”

The next moment, the roulette ball landed on a black number, and another round of cheers went up from the onlookers.

“Thanks, that’s my good luck taken care of. I’ll return the ‘riches’ to your garden later.” The man grabbed chips of the same high value as Gilgamesh’s as he spoke.

I’ll return them to your garden.

Hearing that turn of phrase, Gilgamesh questioned the stranger:

“Oh-ho, eavesdropping on me talking to myself earlier, were you?”

“Talking to yourself? You sure about that?” With an easy smile, the man turned his gaze to Tine, who was still standing behind Gilgamesh. “It’s past midnight. Shouldn’t you let the young lady there get some sleep soon?”

...!

Tine gasped at the sudden attention, but it appeared that she was still invisible to the dealer and the other customers. She tilted her head in puzzlement at the eye patched man’s words.

“I see, it appears you are no ordinary mongrel. Name yourself,” Gilgamesh questioned, flashing an arrogant smile. The eye patched man had caught his interest.







“Hansa Cervantes,” the man answered, rising to his feet and donning the coat he had been carrying under one arm. In a flash a cross necklace was dangling over his black coat. The dealer and the other customers began to wonder, “What’s a priest doing in a place like this?”

Amid the ring of confused stares, the priest who called himself Hansa made a declaration that Gilgamesh and Tine alone would understand.

“I got here a bit late, but I’m this war’s overseer. Pleased to meet you.”

With that, Hansa cashed his chips and headed for the exit. Before anyone knew it, four women were trailing beside him. Coupled with the casino setting, they produced a scene in which his clerical garments felt strongly out of place.

“I see you ended up going to the casino in uniform after all, Mr. Hansa,” one of the four women said as they exited the casino.

“Couldn’t be helped. A young lady we got information is one of the Masters entered the casino with a man who seems like a Heroic Spirit. I didn’t have time to change clothes. But... don’t tell master, okay?” Hansa shrugged, addressing the group of women. “You’re the ones who need to get changed. Yesterday, a crater was made in the desert. Who knows what might happen tonight.”

He directed his steps towards a certain city institution.

“I’ll go ahead to introduce myself as overseer...”

“to a man I’ll bet is one of the masterminds who caused this joke of a war.”

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The police station. Interrogation room.

Dawn was still far off. In the interrogation room of Snowfield Police Station, a bizarre interview was being conducted.

“...So, your name is?”

“If you are troubled for a name to address me by, please call me ‘Saber,’” the handcuffed aristocratic man answered the sour-faced police detective, sitting majestically in his chair.

“Saber? Like a cavalry saber? Well, ain’t that clever. What drugstore did you find that sword we confiscated from you in, anyway?”

A sarcastic query. The man who called himself Saber grasped the meaning, and responded with a cheerful smile.

“I think I’ll use that ‘right to remain silent.’ It’s my favorite sword; I’d be in trouble if there

was a flood of customers and they sold out.”

“...You’ve got quite a mouth on you for a guy dressed up as a king or knight or something.”

“Quite perceptive. I see the officials of this country are of a superior order.”

Saber sounded impressed. The detective’s response was irritated.

“You touched in the head? Or is it drugs?”

“I suppose so. In my youth, I was even nicknamed *Océ No*. To those around me I must have seemed eccentric, but I took it as a compliment.”

“I see. So then you bought into your own hype, got carried away and wrecked the opera house?”

“Certainly, I got carried away. It is a fact that, realizing that I had been summoned atop a gorgeous stage, replete with luxury, I was in high spirits,” Saber addressed the officers, his expression growing serious. “What you ought to do is look into what it will cost, and how many craftsmen it will require, to repair the opera house. Inform me, and I will make amends.”

“You’ll have to ask the DA about that. In the first place, does a nut like you even have a chance in hell of covering the cost?”

“If I said I didn’t... I’d be lying.”

“You got somebody to foot the bill for you or something?”

The costume the man called Saber had on looked to authentic to have been bought at a local party goods shop. It had probably come with a hefty price tag. The detective in charge of the interrogation, having reached that conclusion, was attempting to draw some information out of the man, when—

“If you like, you may even finance it for me. I will not forget the favor.”

“And you can quit screwing around!”

The detective banged his palm on the table. Saber brooded for a moment, grunted, then opened his mouth to speak.

“I won’t say for free. I can show you a trick. You’ll have the chance to see something that’s likely beyond the bounds of your common sense.”

“A magic trick?”

“Yes. I’ll be frank... it’s quite something. You’ll be amazed.”

Saber spoke with an innocent smile like a child’s. The police officers exchanged glances, smirked, and decided to play along with the madman.

“Ha. In that case, why don’t you show us what you can do in your condition?” one of the officers said.

Saber nodded, smiling, raised his cuffed hands and gave them a shake.

“I have nothing in my hands. Do you agree? Look closely.”

“...Yeah.”

“...And now, I’m going to disappear.”

“Huh?”

The officers were puzzled, not quite taking in the man’s meaning. Then... Saber’s body vanished like mist. His handcuffs, left hanging in the air, fell to the table with a loud clatter.

“...!?”

“Wha...”

The officers were all on the verge of panicking. They ran their eyes over their surroundings, stretching hands to the pistols and stun guns at the hips.

“Where’d he go?”

“What happened?”

“Do not open the door!”

The uproar continued... but as soon as they took their eyes off the man’s chair for a moment, he was back in his original position. The only difference from before was the handcuffs, which were lying empty on the table.

“...”

The officers trained their guns on the man, wiping away cold sweat.

“D, don’t move! Do not move!”

“I haven’t moved a step. I told you, didn’t I? That you’d be amazed?” Saber said. Then he wiped the smile from his face, as if to say that the joke ended there, and addressed the police officers with a serious expression.

“Of course, I could have gone through the wall and escaped, or even done something to you. Or taken my leave of the opera house without ever being seen.”

The blazing glint in his eyes projected an intimidating air, as if he was about to devour the officers’ souls. In spite of which, Saber stubbornly endeavored to prove that he bore them no ill will.

“This is my way of showing you ‘respect.’”

“‘Respect’...?”

“Before the question of atoning for the crime of destruction, to make another shoulder the blame for it would be a knight’s dishonor. If I behaved so, I would never again be able to face the founding king of my native land, whom I love and respect. For that very reason, I ask you, who have proof of my power, to understand. I intend to make amends, but I do not intend to be restrained. I have merely come here to testify that the woman is innocent.”

The police officers sank into silence at Saber’s quietly-spoken words. The content of the man’s words was too out of place and absurd to believe, but an intimidating aura continued to

emanate from him, and forced them to accept it.

"That I do not eliminate you with force is the bare minimum of respect due to the noble intentions of loyalty to your task dedication to the public peace. I will abide your restraint until dawn."

The word "respect" came out of Saber's mouth, but the police officers were regarding the man before them with looks of fear. Like frogs caught in the glare of a snake, they were rooted to the spot. It appeared that they truly were faithful to their mission, because they continued to glare at Saber in spite of that.

Saber, perhaps comfortable being the target of their animosity, spoke cheerfully.

"I will vanish with the dawn, so, well, you had better think how to gloss it over now."

Finally, with an innocent smile, he tacked on a remark that really must have been mockery.

"If you like, we can think on it together."

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The police station. Conference room.

Watching the events in the interrogation room on his desk monitor, the chief pressed his fingers to his temples and heaved a sigh.

"...He appears to be entirely unconscious of the secrecy of the Holy Grail War."

Then, furrowing his brow, he issued instructions to his secretary, who stood beside him.

"Exclude normal officers from future observation and interrogation. Assign it to members of Clan Calatin. Perform memory alteration treatments on all personnel in the room with him now."

"Understood."

The secretary saluted. As she did so, the chief took the sword lying on the table in his hand.

"...This is the Noble Phantasm we confiscated from him?"

"Yes, sir. It doesn't appear to be anything more than an ornamental sword... but that might be because its true name has not been released."

"No, this really is just an ornamental sword. I can't sense even a speck of magical energy."

When he reached that point, a sudden realization struck the chief.

"...Just now, when he assumed spirit form, did this sword disappear?"

"I can't say, sir... I was distracted by the monitor as well, and didn't notice."

"Hmm..."

According to the report from Faldeus' survey team, Gilgamesh had "fired" hundreds, maybe thousands, or Noble Phantasms the night before. Now, however, not a scrap of them remained. Of course there was always the possibility that Faldeus was lying, but it seemed more probable that some force had acted to retrieve the fired Noble Phantasms to Gilgamesh's treasury.

"There are still a lot of black boxes in the Holy Grail War. It appears we'll need to give some thought to the relationship between Heroic Spirits and their equipment."

With his eyes fixed on "Saber's sword," which he was actually holding in his hands and touching, the chief ruminated on the future.

"I'll ask Caster for his opinion later... although I doubt he'll give me a straight answer."

Then he replaced the sword on the table, and directed his steps towards the entrance of the conference room.

"I'll meet with the woman who appears to be Saber's Master."

"Isn't direct contact dangerous?"

The secretary let her unease show through.

"...If I pawned it off on a member of Clan Calatin and it turned out to be a trap, it would still be risky," the chief answered in frigid tones. "If I didn't have the resolve to put myself in harm's way, I would never have chosen these tactics."

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The same time. Another area inside the station.

Ayaka, who had finished her interrogation and been stuffed into the holding area commonly called a "jail" or a "police cell," was exhausted. She lay face up on the bed, still wearing her glasses. Surrounded, not by iron bars, but by walls and a door, she was now completely isolated.

It was a far cleaner room than Ayaka had anticipated. If you left out how cramped it was, the cell seemed more agreeable than camping in a tent, or worrying about mosquitoes and ticks in a cheap hotel.

Ayaka had heard that in America they made no special distinctions between jails, detention centers, and prisons. Then again, she wasn't clear on the difference herself. In any case, it didn't change the fact that she would not be leaving for a while. She resigned herself, looked up at the ceiling, and decided to get some rest.

But agitation kept her awake. Her head was full of the contents of her examination. Who was she? Where had she come from? Why had she been there? She seemed to be Japanese, so what was her objective in visiting America? A long litany of questions designed to sound out a



suspect's past. It had been a reasonable, straightforward course of action, but Ayaka had found it unbearably painful.

Oh, I hate it. I hate it.

Even remembering it is a pain.

No, that's wrong. I'm not annoyed.

I just don't want to remember because I'm scared.

While traveling this country's vast expanse, she had been able to forget the past. She had been able to run from her sins.

For a while, I didn't see her, but...

The red hooded girl who had appeared at the opera house. Picturing the smile beneath her hood made Ayaka's whole body break out in a sweat.

She had been made to ride an elevator several times while she was being dragged through the station, and every time she had been on tenterhooks. She did not know how many years it had been. She had done her best to not even enter buildings that had elevators. Because she had known that the instant she set eyes on an elevator, the red hooded girl would be standing behind her.

The police officers had appeared to be unable to see her, but Ayaka had certainly sensed her presence inside the station elevator. Ayaka, paling with fear, had made absolutely certain not to look in her direction. All the while telling herself, "She and I are different people. This has nothing to do with me."

In the end, Ayaka could not tell whether the red hooded girl was a ghost, or an illusion her own mind showed her, or something else entirely. All that mattered to Ayaka was the fact that she could see the red hooded girl.

She was supposed to have come to this city to escape from that girl, so why had it turned out like this? Just as Ayaka settled down to ponder the question afresh, there was a sudden change in her situation.

"Are you well? You look quite tired."

Without warning, the man from the opera house appeared in a corner of her cell.

"!?"

Startled, Ayaka shot upright. The man who had entered unnoticed called out to her again.

"Don't act so surprised. Passing through walls is nothing if I shift to spirit form. My interrogation's been put on hold. I was put in a cell a little farther down, so I came to check in on you."

The man had easily penetrated the locked isolation cell. Perhaps he really was some kind of

spirit. There was far less distance between them than there had been even at the opera house, and Ayaka stood up so as to be on her guard. Pressing her back to the wall, she opened her mouth to speak.

“...I thought I told you to leave me alone,” she bluntly enquired.

“You’re not my Master, are you?” The man asked back.

“...That’s right. I’m not your Master or anything else.”

Ayaka meant her answer as a curt refusal, but when the man heard it, he grinned like a mischievous child.

“I guess that means I’ve no need to obey your orders, then!”

“Wha...”

“Now I can bother you all I want. I’m going to take personal care of you, so be prepared.”

The man sounded cheerful. Ayaka shook her head. She had had enough.

“Please, just leave me alone.”

“As much as I love to grant the wishes of the common people as best I can, there’s a reason why that won’t do.”

“A reason?”

In the face of the dubious Ayaka, the Heroic Spirit got straight to the point.

“I think it’s due to the rites built into your tattoos... It looks like my magical energy ‘lines’ are connected to you, instead of the mage who had my Command Seals.”

“...What?”

The man’s abrupt manner of speaking caused Ayaka to knit her brows.

“In other words, I get magical energy from you, and that allows me to materialize in this world. That means our fates are linked, even if it isn’t a proper Master and Servant relationship,” he lightly announced, then continued to the dumbfounded Ayaka. “Without you, I probably wouldn’t have been able to manifest in the first place. I am in your debt. Thank you.”

The man held out a hand to shake. Ayaka brushed it aside and scowled at him.

“...If you feel indebted to me, leave me alone.”

“That I refuse to do! I will take good care of you. And bother you as well. I’ll save you, even if you wail and rave that you don’t want me to. After all, if you die, I disappear, and then I won’t be able to obtain the Holy Grail.”

“You’re going to save me from something...?”

“Of course. From the other participants in this war. Master or not, as long as your magical energy lines are tied to me, you will naturally be targeted.”

“This is the worst...”

Ayaka held her head in her hands.

“Think positively,” the man told her. “Compared to having all your skin flayed off, being rubbed in salt, and being in the same situation, for example, you’re much better off because you’re not in pain.”

“You give some extreme examples...”

“I’ve often been told that I am extreme in everything I do.”

The man sounded embarrassed, as if he had just been complimented. Ayaka, perhaps realizing that anything she said would be useless, decided to sound him out and broached a different topic.

“You’re a noble or something, right? Doesn’t being arrested by the police go against your pride or something?”

“It’s much better than when I was imprisoned in a mountain fortress. I can step out for a stroll when I please. Besides, if you had been punished in my place, that would have wounded my pride far more. Oh, but I’m not just helping you for the sake of my pride.”

“I told you, you don’t have to help me at all...”

Ayaka heaved an exasperated sigh. The man continued to address her with an easy manner, completely unlike the speech he had made on top of the fire-engine.

“Call me Saber for the time being. To go without naming myself to my benefactor is dishonorable, but sooner or later I will find an opportunity to tell you my true name.”

Saber then turned back to Ayaka with a serious air.

“Won’t you tell me a few things now? What were you doing in a place like that? What are those tattoos?” he enquired. After making a troubled face for a moment, however, he shook his head and posed a more important question.

“...Sorry. First, please tell me your name.”

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A hallway inside the station.

The chief of police, unaware that Saber and Ayaka were conversing in her cell, slightly quickened his pace towards the isolation cells. Just as he reached the elevator, however, a female station employee came running up to him.

“Oh, there you are, chief! There’s a visitor to see you.”

“Tell them to... No, wait.”

He planned to postpone if it was a politician or someone of that kind, but there was also a

chance that it was Faldeus or Kuruoka.

“...Who is it?”

“Well... he calls himself a priest, but he looked pretty suspicious to me...”

A priest.

The chief scowled. Another possibility had struck him. Before long it became a suspicion, and the next words out of the station employee’s mouth proved it.

“All he’ll say is, ‘Tell him it’s about a cup stolen from Japan. He’ll understand.’”

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In the city.

On the roof of a particularly tall adjacent building, the woman Assassin focused her mind on the police station below her, quietly adjusting her breathing.

She had searched for information in the city, and learned that the Saber Heroic Spirit had been taken to the police station. After that it was merely a matter of slipping inside and carrying out the assassination, this time in perfect form, or so the woman Assassin had thought. Now that she had surveyed the station, however, a terrifying fact dawned on her.

A great number of mystic barriers had been erected on the site of the police station, transforming it into a fortress that completely shut out all except those who approached through the legitimate entrances. Even if she were to erase her presence and attempt to get in through the front door, barriers designed to expose such subterfuge were set up five or six layers thick. The bounded field had been formed so skillfully that it was hidden even from the nearby mages. She had passed by it during the day and not noticed a thing.

As a result of more focused observation, she detected the “presence” of several mages inside the building. She could not believe it. To her, the city’s people were overwhelmingly “infidels,” but the fact that mages, viewed as “heretics” by so many religions, were in possession of its judiciary and administrative organs was hard to accept on short notice. Considering the Clock Tower’s influence, it was probably not a rare thing in the modern era, but she had nothing to do with the Clock Tower, and it shocked her.

Although they belonged to different sects, there were some in this city who worshipped the same god as herself. And mages, who were not even infidels, were trying to rule them from behind the scenes. She could not turn a blind eye to that.

It was unthinkable that an organization that had erected a bounded field on such a large scale was not involved in the Holy Grail War being conducted in the city. Most importantly, her

enemy, the Saber Heroic Spirit, was within. She drew a large breath, and resolved to storm the enemy camp.

The chief of her time had been able to slip — practically dance — through any barrier. She knew that she herself was not so skillful. All she could do was to make use of the techniques she had developed in imitation of previous generations, and fight.

She would go on running until she smashed into a wall. Nothing else mattered. If even her immature self could accomplish something, then her life would have meaning.

No, she did not need meaning. She did not need to think; only to break through.

She digested her silent resolve beneath her black raiment, and took a huge leap into the air. As she fell, she forcibly shut down all the barriers. Her opponents would notice her presence, but she did not care. She would eliminate all enemies. Having made up her mind on that, she became a cannonball hurtling towards the police station.

Several seconds later, all the barriers spread in the skies above it shattered at once...

And the curtain went up on the fanatic's war. She had resolved to fight through to the bitter end alone.

If she had made a miscalculation... it was that she was not, in fact, alone. She had one fiendish reinforcement. But then, she would never have wished for the aid of such a creature.

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In front of Crystal Hill casino. The entertainment district.

"A casino, huh? Looks fun."

Flat, who had been wide awake since being interviewed in front of the opera house, was roaming through the entertainment district. Amid the dazzling lights of Main Street, his attention had been captured by the still more dazzling neon of the casino.

"I could have sworn that casinos are forbidden to those under 21 in this state," Jack the Ripper, still in the form of a wristwatch, chided him.

"Oh, I can't go in, then. That's a shame. I haven't had a chance to play in ages."

"Been in one before, have you?"

Jack sounded surprised. Flat wistfully recalled the past as he answered.

"I'm from Monaco, you see. There was a really big casino boat that floated on the sea near my hometown. I used to play there. They had an age limit too, but after a bit of this and that, the owner gave me special permission... He asked me to show him what magecraft I could use in exchange, though, so I did."



“...Truly, you live in a way diametrically opposed to my image of a mage.”

“Oh, you flatterer.”

“No, it is not my place to speak. If that is how you choose to live, then do as you like. I only pray that the other mages do not do away with you.”

Jack sounded exasperated, but something in Flat’s story seemed to have aroused his interest. He decided to continue asking about the casino boat.

“Still, if he asked to see your magecraft... was the owner a mage as well?”

“Nope. Well, apparently he used to be.”

“...He ‘used to be’?”

The watch’s dial tilted quizzically in response to Flat’s odd turn of phrase.

“Yeah. He turned from a mage to a Dead Apostle.”

“Dead Apostle?”

“A bloodsucker... Oh, would you understand if I said ‘vampire’?”

Jack’s dial bent further at Flat’s abrupt declaration.

“It’s true that there are theories I was actually a vampire... but even for a mage, isn’t that a bit too B-grade occult?”

“Jack the Ripper resurrected in the modern day is way more B-grade occult, though.”

“Humph.”

The Holy Grail provided the Heroic Spirits with the minimum knowledge necessary to fight the Holy Grail War. If Jack did not know about vampires, that probably meant that the Grail had judged information concerning them was irrelevant to the conflict. Flat thought so, at least. He decided to give Jack a simple explanation.

“Vampires really do exist. Well, mystically speaking, they’re called bloodsuckers or Dead Apostles, though. There are people who get bitten by a bloodsucker and then become one after a few years, but there are also all sorts of ex-mages and so on who become Dead Apostles on their own, chasing after immortality or the Root or something like that.”

“Mages can become vampires, then?”

“Just between us, there’s even one among the higher ups at the Clock Tower. A Dead Apostle who uses Magic.”

“Goodness...”

Jack followed his exclamation of surprise with a sarcastic jab at Flat.

“You, of course, would probably become a vampire without a second thought because ‘it’s cool.’”

Flat’s response, however, was unexpectedly serious.

“They are cool, but I don’t know about becoming one. I mean, there’s the bloodsucking urge

and things to consider.”

“That’s a surprise. I wouldn’t have thought you had such commonsensical morals.”

“Plus, it’s, you know, inefficient.”

“...?”

Neglecting Jack’s apparent doubt, Flat pointed to another part of town and said:

“Oh look, speak of the devil and something something.”

“What is it?”

Flat’s gaze rested on a young man, who stood on the sidewalk of Main Street facing the police station. He had a somehow carefree air about him. Flat kept his eyes on the young man, and casually declared:

“That guy over there, looking toward the police station... He’s a Dead Apostle. Probably.”

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The police station. Lobby.

“You’re Chief Orlando Reeve?”

This late at night, the station lobby was mostly devoid of ordinary people. Only night shift officers and the juvenile delinquents they hauled in could occasionally be glimpsed passing through.

The lobby of Snowfield Center Station was considerably more spacious than that of an ordinary police station, forming a well that reached into the third story. The exposed portions of the second and third floor hallways were incorporated into the station’s interior design. Unlike the fashionably designed lobby’s of some California police stations, it gave the solemn impression of a castle that had been forced to modernize. Standing in the center of that strangely oppressive lobby, the man radiated a singular presence.

He was dressed as a priest, and wore a gaudy eye patch. Just by being in the police station, he naturally drew the stares of the few passersby. The chief, however, stood boldly before the mysterious priest and answered:

“I am Reeve... And you are?”

“Hansa Cervantes. An... ‘overseer’ dispatched to the Snowfield Center church. I assume you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I know what you’re talking about,” the chief answered expressionlessly. Hansa grinned broadly and spread his hands.

“If you plan on insisting ‘magecraft is just a hobby,’ or ‘my subordinates did it on their own’ with this many barriers up, I won’t stop you. Even if your Servant does get eliminated, all you’ll lose is a safe place to hide. Surely even you value your life?”

“...”

The main jobs of the Holy Grail War’s overseer were observing the war’s progress and concealing magecraft and miracles from mundane eyes. Aside from those, however, they were also tasked with “sheltering the defeated.”

If a Master still had the will to fight even after their Servant had been defeated, they had the option of making a new contract with a Servant who had likewise lost their Master and was just waiting for dissolution. They could then return to the front. In order to prevent that, more than a few mages tried to finish off Masters who had lost their Servants. Even a Master who no longer had the will to go on might find themselves targeted by the other participants. Ensuring the safety of such Masters was one of the jobs of the Holy Church and its overseer.

Of course, even if the chief came to them later and said, “I actually am a Master, so help me,” it would be the church’s policy to offer him shelter, so Hansa’s threat amounted to no more than a jibe or a bluff. The chief, however, seemed to have taken a still shrewder view of that line, and narrowed his eyes warily. Hansa, in contrast, shrugged his shoulders with an easy manner.

“Whoops. I’m not here to ask leading questions. I already know that you’re an outlaw with no ties to the Clock Tower, Chief Orlando Reeve. I could add that you’re guilty of perpetrating an unnatural accumulation of personnel. Through your good offices you’ve been assembling officers from all over since long before this war started. Only circumstantial evidence, but I’d say it’s enough.”

“...I didn’t think you’d have investigated so thoroughly in a mere few days. Impressive.”

“It’s the Church’s informants who are impressive. If you’ve got the time to praise me, try splurging on donations during service next Sunday.”

The chief was not sure if the wisecracking priest was being sarcastic.

“Either way, it is hardly a matter to discuss here. I will show you to the reception room.”

“I think I’ll pass. It doesn’t look like you guys have any intention of playing nice with the Church, and I’ve got no intention of leaping into the belly of such a shady beast.”

Without further ado, Hansa seated himself in one of the lobby chairs. He looked at a flat-screen television mounted on a column before speaking again.

“They’ve been showing footage of the accident — or incident — at the opera house for a while now. There’s a weird guy in it. If that’s a genuine Heroic Spirit, it would mean you guys have already failed at keeping the ritual a secret. Can’t say we didn’t warn you. If you feel like making any tearful apologies, I can give you phone numbers for some big-wigs at the Eighth

Sacrament Assembly.”

Hansa was smiling, but his provocative manner was openly hostile. The chief answered him with an ice-cold look.

“There’s no need for concern. No ordinary person could see it for what it really is.”

“Is that so? Let’s change the topic, then. Are that Heroic Spirit and its Master here?”

“...If I said yes?”

“They’re not in the Church’s reports. I’d like to verify at least their faces. Say hello if I can. And if the Master’s a woman, I’d like to ask her to dinner; treat her to jalokia jambalaya or something. I don’t know about you, but the young lady next to you can come along too.”

The secretary, still expressionless, rejected the abrupt offer, and glanced at the chief. The chief heaved a big sigh, and declared bluntly to the persistent Hansa:

“Let me be clear: our ritual is different from the one in Fuyuki. We have no intention of coming to terms with you. Now go pray like a good little priest.”

“If we’re through talking, I don’t need you to tell me to pray in church.”

“You won’t be praying in a church. You’ll be doing it right here,” the chief told the ever-wisecracking Hansa.

“Oh?”

“...You said that Servant and Master are ‘not in the church’s reports,’ if I remember correctly.”

The warmth was steadily going out of the chief’s voice.

“How much do you know? Do you have information that even we don’t? Until we bridge that intelligence gap, we cannot possibly send you home.”

“Sorry, but I just can’t sleep without my pillow. Mind if I run home to get it?”

“Hansa Cervantes, was it? You’ve made a mistake.”

The chief continued dispassionately without lending an ear to Hansa’s jokes.

“Didn’t you consider that this lobby is already in my belly?”

The chief’s tone grew still colder. That was when Hansa noticed — the ordinary people he had sporadically glimpsed in the lobby had completely disappeared.

Clearing out the people, huh.

Even the officers and receptionists who had been hanging around were gone. In their place, a succession of police officers filed in from the multiple entrances adjoining the lobby. All of them were staring coolly at Hansa, and lined up so as to surround him.

These guys... aren’t your average cops.

Just their bearing and the way they walked was enough to tell him that they had received more than ordinary police training. At the same time, they clearly had not been brainwashed; they were standing in this “cleared-out” space of their own wills.

Seeing the situation he was in, Hansa, still seated in his chair, glared up at the chief's face.

"If you're going to arrest me, what are the charges?"

"Earlier I believe you said, 'surely even you value your life'... I sensed danger in your speech and conduct. I have received an undeniable threat."

"...You watch too much TV, chief."

"You do not have the right to remain silent. Nothing you say will be used in a court of law. You do not have the right to an attorney, and one will not be provided to you. Be prepared."

The officers slowly began to close in as their chief made his sarcastic recitation.

"Making enemies of us isn't a winning strategy. It doesn't like I can do anything to you, but when you one-sidedly bully a guy like this, the relationship between our organizations is liable to go sour."

"I agree. That's precisely why I would like us to share information amicably."

The chief looked down at Hansa. His gaze was far from amicable.

"You shouldn't startle an ordinary, upstanding citizen like that. I might kick up a fuss."

Hansa glared back, flashing a provocative grin. The situation seemed to have reached critical mass, when... the chief's phone vibrated, and the mood of the room relaxed.

Scowling, the chief took a step back and pulled out his phone. Naturally, he did not relax his vigilance towards Hansa. He cautiously put the receiver to his ear, at which point an inappropriately cheerful voice became audible.

"Yo! How're you doing, bro?"

"If you have business with me, we can talk later. I'm in the middle of something."

The chief, hearing Caster's voice, leapt to a curt reply. Caster, however, delivered a clear warning without listening to his Master's voice.

"Get out of there right now, bro. That, or get ready to meet the enemy with everything you've got. You totally cut off telepathy on your end, so I had to reach you with the blessings of civilization."

"What do you mean? How do you know something like that?"

"That's a trade secret. Well, good luck!"

With that, the call cut off. The chief scowled.

"Good lord, he's a hard man to deal with."

But it had not seemed like a prank call, either. The chief was already well aware that Caster's intelligence-gathering skills were abnormal. But what did it mean that he had now progressed to issuing warnings in real time? No sooner had the doubt crossed the chief's mind, however, than...

Crackle.



Every vein in his body set up a distorted wailing. To be precise, the magic circuits that ran through it did.

The barriers... Shit! What's going on?

The anti-mage barriers erected many layers thick had been destroyed in an instant, with a force like a missile plowing into a shelter.

Picture slipping through the security system of a bank or an art museum without triggering it even once, and successfully carrying out a theft without allowing even the fact of your infiltration to be noticed. That was the kind of barrier breaking the chief had envisioned.

This, however, was like a bomb striking the building and tearing open a hole in the wall to make an entrance. In other words, it meant that whoever had broken the barrier did not care if their intrusion was detected. This was no infiltration; it was an "impact."

"Friends of yours?"

The chief glared at Hansa, but the priest only shrugged his shoulders with every appearance of ignorance.

"I'd be glad if it was," he said while glancing up at the ceiling, "but if my friends come it'll be through the front entrance or the back door, not from up in the sky."

"..."

He can sense it?

The chief could sense that it was the barrier around the upper part of the station that had been broken as well. Even though he knew there must have been some kind of attack, however, he could sense no sound or reverberation from the impact. What in the world had happened? He only had a brief time to wonder...

Before every light in the building went out, plunging all of them into deep darkness.

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An isolation cell.

"Finally, you've told me your name. Thank you, Ayaka. One day I will return the favor."

Saber, who had employed all his wiles and at last succeeded in ferreting Ayaka's name out of her, continued his questioning with a cheerful smile.

"And? What are you doing in a town like this?"

"I..."

Telling everything would probably be the fastest way to shut the man up, Ayaka thought,

and resigned herself to narrate her experiences.

“I started out in Japan, running from city to city.”

“You were running from something?”

“I don’t know how many years I did that for. I just drifted around from place to place...”

While biting her lip, seemingly less in irritation than in fear, Ayaka gave a roundabout account of her past.

“Eventually, I ended up back in the town where I started. There was a weird castle in the forest there, and—”

At that point, the light in the isolation cell suddenly went out.

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

Saber and Ayaka look around in unison, but there was no light even outside the little window set in the cell door. They realized that the entire police station was blacked out.

“...A blackout? It should switch over to emergency power soon. I think.”

Ayaka sounded a little frightened in the darkness. Saber’s wary voice echoed in response.

“...If it is just a blackout.”

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The police station. Interior.

The woman Assassin had disabled both the main switchboard and emergency generator in quick succession, plunging the police station into total blackness. She blended with that darkness, sweeping through the building like a wind. She occasionally encountered police officers and detectives patrolling with flashlights, but she was a creeping shadow, staying out of the light and never making a sound. She had free rein of the station.

In order to challenge that Heroic Spirit, I will need to risk my own life.

She mentally prepared herself as she raced through the station’s long passageways. The special training she had undergone meant that she needed no light to move. Sensing the movement of air, the flow of magical energy, and the echoing sounds of wind, she was able to see her surroundings with her entire body, and even sense the flow of energy within them. This was another of the arts attained by the great chiefs: “Meditative Sensitivity: Zabaniya.” A superhuman sensory ability that enabled her to feel currents of power — such as magical energy, water, electricity, or wind — whether natural or artificial, as if they were part of her own body.

She had made use of that power to locate the station’s power source, and destroy it. That

done, she made for the highest concentration of magical energy. Flowing down the stairs like a waterfall, she finally arrived at a space filled with disordered currents of it. That is, at the most spacious area in the police station — the front lobby.

“...!”

At almost the same time the woman Assassin leapt into the lobby, the uniformed man in its center deployed magecraft to light the space, matching the positions of its existing lighting fixtures.

A mage!

Assassin promptly dematerialized, but even she was no match for the speed of light. In the instant before she disappeared, Assassin’s image was burned into several pairs of eyes, the mage’s among them.

A shadow dissolving into light. There was no other way to describe the ghostly figure that had momentarily existed in the doorway.

“What...?”

A Servant...?

The police chief was a Master with Command Seals; even that momentary glimpse was enough for him to be certain that what he had seen was a Servant.

That wasn’t saber. I only got a glimpse, but those stats... Assassin!?

When a Master looked directly at a Servant participating in the Holy Grail War, they were able to obtain a certain amount of data. It took a form optimized to the mind of the Master in question; a page of a grimoire, or a sheet of parchment. Of course, they could not discern a Servant’s true name, but they were able to read their general physical parameters and some of their special traits.

It had only been a moment, so he had not been able to parse most of what he had seen, but he had managed to sense that the Servant excelled in stealth and espionage. Even their appearance — black from head to toe, as far as he had been able to see — suggested Assassin.

Humph... So, a Master saw Saber on TV and decided to send in Assassin. We can’t do anything physical to a Servant while it’s in spirit form, but it’s hard to imagine that it will stay that way for long.

A Servant in spirit form was incapable of taking any offensive or defensive measures. If a Master or other mage possessed the means of attacking a spirit body, they ran the risk of being one-sidedly annihilated. Consequently, remaining in spirit form around hostile Servants and Masters was not a winning strategy. The moment required to rematerialize could also create a fatal opening in a battle of instants.

Best to assume it’s already materialized and is hiding somewhere, the chief concluded, and

turned a wary eye to his surroundings. There were countless places to hide in the atrium lobby, including the exposed sections of second and third floor hallway.

His Command Seals were concealed under his gloves. How likely was it that he had been exposed as a Master? In the worst case scenario, the chief thought, the Servant might have come for him, and not Saber. He was struggling to plan his next move, when Hansa, who had gotten behind a pillar in a corner of the lobby without anyone noticing, drastically narrowed his options.

“Oh, was that your Servant just now, chief?”

A casual question. The chief glared at Hansa, immediately realizing what it meant.

“Son of a... You’re overstepping your jurisdiction as overseer.”

“I thought you didn’t need a church overseer?”

Hansa flashed a malicious grin, crossed his arms and leaned against the pillar, as if to emphasize that he was just a bystander.

“Just a bit of passive resistance to a big shot who bullies the little guy.”

An infidel priest.

If he was an overseer come to confirm the existence of the Holy Grail, then he was a target for Assassin to be wary of. If, on the other hand, he really was a neutral party and had been dispatched simply to verify the Grail’s authenticity, then she had no more reason to seek his life than that of any other infidel in the city.

The “chief,” however, she could not overlook. The overseer had asked him about “his Servant.” Taking into account the many-layered barrier erected around the station, and the fact that he was both a Master and a person of status, even she, ignorant of constitutional government, could easily guess that the man who appeared to be the chief of this police station was probably involved in this Holy Grail War at a fundamental level.

In her mind, priorities shifted. At the present moment, the police chief right in front of her took precedence over the knight of the opera house. She would capture him, then extract information about the masterminds behind this Holy Grail War. Judgment, she decided, would come later.

Assassin materialized in a blind spot of the third floor hallway, and fixed her aim on the chief. She prepared the most suitable Noble Phantasm for capturing the mage for use. She still believed that the chief was her only enemy.

Until an arrow imbued with brutal magical energy came flying down the hall towards her.

“...!”

It came from a total blind spot. Without the keen sense she had acquired to run in the dark,

she would not have even noticed she had been attacked until it struck her.

Picking up the disturbance of nearby magical energy and the faint creak of a bow being drawn, she realized she was being targeted.

The woman Assassin twisted, flexing her joints farther than seemed humanly possible, and evaded the arrow that had been closing in on her heart. It flew straight on down the corridor, and struck what was — from the shooter's perspective — the opposite wall.

The impact wrought incredible destruction. The wall burst apart. The room beyond peeked through a hole bored clean through the reinforced concrete.

She did not know how it had destroyed the wall. All she knew for certain was... that the strike had been powerful enough to bring down any human, and possibly even an average Heroic Spirit.

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An isolation cell.

"...What was that sound?" Ayaka asked uneasily in the darkness. The crashes sounded like something breaking — far off, but definitely in the same building.

"Maybe someone's come after you?"

"I suppose it's possible."

Pale lights sprang to life around them as Saber spoke. A soft, firefly glow filled the isolation cell, and illuminated Ayaka's blank stare.

Water drops about the size of marbles hung in the air. The light came directly from them.

"You can use Magic...?"

"Not Magic; magecraft."

"I'm not sure I understand the difference."

"Magecraft is what humans can achieve themselves with enough time and effort. Magic creates miracles beyond the reach of modern man... Or so I'm told. I'm not a mage myself, so I don't know the details, but apparently the advance of science has turned most Magic into magecraft."

Saber spoke like it had nothing to do with him. Ayaka stared quizzically at the water droplets serving as their light source.

At that, Saber shook his head a tad apologetically.

"Just so you know, I didn't make these."

"What do you...?"

Before Ayaka could even finish the question, Saber disappeared.



“Hey!”

Left alone in the cell with the shining droplets, Ayaka flopped back onto the bed with a sigh. A few seconds later, she got up again.

The door of the isolation cell clanged open, and Saber stepped through it as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He jingled a bunch of keys and grinned broadly.

“I secretly borrowed the keys.”

“Borrowed?...?”

“Ah, a jailbreak. Hehe. It’s a bit thrilling!”

“Where’d your knightly honor go?”

Ayaka sounded exasperated.

“I still intend to make reparations for the theater, of course. I also mean to keep my promise to remain in the custody of the officials here until dawn. Before that, however, I’ll get you to a safe place,” Saber declared, his eyes shining with excitement.

“...Have you considered that this cell is the safest place for me?”

“I wonder about that. This police station is odd. Apparently there are Bounded Fields set up all over the place.”

Saber sounded as if he was repeating what someone had told him. Ayaka frowned.

“Apparently? Who said so?”

Saber held the cell door open with a fearless grin. There was no sign of jailers outside. All that could be heard were clamoring and shouts of protest from the other inmates.

Saber took Ayaka’s hand and walked off out of the cell block. The shining droplets floated ahead.

“Well, you see, it’s complicated.”

“I don’t really get it... What do you mean, ‘Bounded Fields’? There are mages in this police station?”

“More than that; apparently they’re designed into the building’s construction. I was worried that, worst case scenario, everyone in the building might be a mage. Judging by my interrogation earlier, however, that doesn’t seem likely.” Saber’s expression suddenly grew serious. “But this police station was definitely built for mages. If it’s connected to the Holy Grail War, then this commotion doesn’t bode well for us.”

“Why not?”

“They probably originally intended to offer us an alliance, or at least try to get something out of us... But if those vibrations came from another Servant’s attack, then they’ll probably try to get rid of you before you have a chance to turn against them. Apparently there’s a good reason to think so.”

“What do you mean, ‘a good reason’?”

Saber fell silent for a few moments, but when he had reached a point a short distance removed from the cells, he started to mutter under his breath. It sounded like he was objecting to something.

“Hey now... Tell me things like that sooner. If I’d known, I’d have cut down the door and gotten her out at once.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Oh, sorry. Just pretend I’m talking to myself,” he offhandedly apologized before answering Ayaka’s question. He still spoke as if he was reporting something he had been told.

“Apparently there’s a spell built into the ceiling of that cell... designed to control the composition of the air, and suffocate the human inside.”

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The lobby.

She noted the shooter’s appearance as she dodged. A young woman dressed as a police officer. The large quiver on her back clashed jarringly with her uniform, and she was readying, not a standard-issue pistol or baton, but a bow as long as she was tall.

A Noble Phantasm! That woman must be... his Servant!

The woman Assassin sensed at a glance that the bow was a Noble Phantasm, and judged that an Archer Servant contracted with the police chief was dressed as a police officer and mixed in with the station employees. The woman had the presence of an ordinary mage, so she must possess a skill that concealed her nature as a Heroic Spirit. A proper Master with Command Seals could doubtless have told at a glance, but she had no Master, and thus no way of checking.

Having concluded that her opponent was a Servant, Assassin immediately shifted to an offensive posture. She controlled her center of gravity in order to start moving as she landed. The instant she did, however... she caught the faint sound of rubber soles rubbing the floor right beside her.

“!”

Assassin felt a chill. She neither distanced herself from nor approached the bow woman; she leapt straight up with all her might. She flipped her body 180 degrees vertically, and landed on the ceiling of the atrium.



She saw a black man in the uniform of a police officer. hardly surprising. But he was swinging a weapon shaped like a naginata in a horizontal sweep.

If she had moved backward or forward, she might have been caught by that blade.

Another Noble Phantasm... What can it mean...?

Despite her doubts, Assassin kicked off the ceiling and aimed a kick at the naginata man.

“Guh!”

He blocked by a hair’s breadth with the haft of his weapon, but the kick still sent him flying down the hallway.

No resistance. Is he not a Heroic Spirit?

Despite her confusion, Assassin landed in a different spot, still wary of the female officer’s bow. But while she kept her eyes on the far end of the hallways, she neglected the break room door in the wall opposite the atrium. No sooner did she pass in front of it than a large man smashed through the door, charging at her with a giant shield.

“!”

The giant approached her with the force of a cannonball, covering his body with the greatshield. But it was not the man’s large build — more than two meters tall — that made Assassin sense danger; it was the density of the magical energy covering his equally large shield.

Another Noble Phantasm...!

In which case, it was dangerous to think of the attack as a mere charge.

Assassin leapt again, worried what hidden properties the shield might have. She landed in the gigantic umbrella of light that shone from the roof of the atrium.

Then she grasped the situation.

About thirty police officers had gathered unnoticed in the lobby, as well as in the open sections of second and third floor hallways. It was obvious that they had not just overheard the disturbance and come running. They grasped a wide array of armaments, each wrapped in unusually dense magical energy. It seeped out of them on numerous different wavelengths, warping the atmosphere of the entire room.

All of it pointed to one fact, a fact that could upset the entire concept of the Holy Grail War: Every one of those nearly thirty weapons was unmistakably a Noble Phantasm.

“All ordinary personnel have been evacuated through the rear exit. The Bounded Field has been activated, so it’s possible to conceal a degree of disturbance from curious onlookers,” the secretary reported.

At the same time, one of the newly-arrived officers handed the chief a long object wrapped in cloth. Out of it, the chief drew his own weapon — a Japanese sword in a black-lacquered sheath.



“...Looks like things are starting to get interesting,” Hansa whistled cheerily at the spectacle of police officers armed with a plethora of anachronistic weaponry.

The chief issued orders with his glare, and several officers pointed those weapons at Hansa.

“Now that you’ve seen us, it’s even less possible to send you home. We’ll need you to stay quietly where you are until we’re done with you,” the chief coolly announced, his glare trained on the black-robed figure observing the situation from atop a lighting fixture.

“Until you’re done with me’...? That’s a Servant, isn’t it? What happened to yours?”

The chief’s answer was simple and to the point.

“I have no intention of leaking information. I will, however, show you something that will leave you disinclined to resist.”

“And what’s that?”

“A mage’s clumsy battle,” the chief muttered under his breath. Then he quietly drew in a breath, steadied his breathing and the magical energy inside him, and clearly declared:

“The power of the heretical shams we’ve forged to bring down the mighty Heroic Spirits.”

“...”

Staring down from atop the lighting fixture, the woman Assassin was steadying her breathing as well. What she had seen had certainly surprised her, but not enough to overcome her resolve, or her faith.

There were seven Heroic Spirits. Or was it six? For some reason the knowledge she had received from the Holy Grail was vague about the number.

But that had never bothered her.

Her actions would be the same if there were a hundred, or even a thousand, Heroic Spirits aiming for the Grail. It just so happened that there were about thirty here.

Eliminate them all.

She made up her mind. At the same time, she murmured softly. Murmured the name of the karma she bore of her own free will; the name of the power she had borrowed from the great chiefs.

“...Capricious Fleeting Shadow: Zabaniya...”

An instant later, darkness spread from the opening of the hood that concealed her features.

“...!”

The chief saw the “darkness” that stretched out from the probable Assassin coming towards



him, and immediately leapt back. He escaped by a hair's breadth.

When the "darkness" reached where he had been standing, it shredded the marble floor like cheese.

It spread throughout the lobby, with the black-robed Assassin's head as its center. Even the officers armed with Noble Phantasms were hard pressed to do more than block or evade such an attack.

Then one of the officers at the chief's side lost an arm to the "darkness."

"Gwah...!"

It coiled around the man's arm like a tentacle, trying to lift his whole body off the floor.

"..."

Silently, the chief leapt, instantaneously drawing his sword. The blade gleamed bewitchingly as it sung through the air, bisecting the black tendrils that grasped at his subordinate's arm. He felt resistance as it cut, and saw the severed "darkness" flutter gently to the ground.

Hair...!?

A mystic art that caused her own hair to grow explosively, and allowed her to control it more freely than her own hands and feet.

That was the chief's initial assessment, but, looking at the rents in the floor, he slightly revised his ideas.

No, this isn't hair anymore. She's taken it into the realm of blades.

So, this is her Noble Phantasm.

"...Almost like Medusa in Greek myth."

Still, it was manageable now that he knew the trick.

If the fight had been one on one, or if his group had consisted of ordinary police officers, they would not have been able to make a move. But the officers gathered here were blessed with Noble Phantasms and trained to slaughter Heroic Spirits. If they lost this head-on collision with Assassin, they would never be able to challenge higher-ranked Servants such as the King of Heroes, the as-yet unseen Rider, or the newly-materialized Saber.

"I see. An ideal opponent for our first stepping stone." The chief refocused on Assassin, and issued orders to his nearby subordinates in a tone of icy command. "Have no fear. It doesn't matter if we destroy the lobby; suppress her by any means necessary."

The chief held his sword in his right hand, and drew a gun from his breast pocket with his left.

"I'll use up this block before you destroy it."

It was a mystic tool, loaded, not with ordinary bullets, but with special rounds designed to activate spells.

The chief aimed his gun up and fired, as if to signal a shift from defense to offense.

He wasn't aiming at Assassin. He was aiming at the traps built into the ceiling of Orlando Reeves' police station — his mage's workshop — around her.

The built-in magecraft activated, temporarily strengthening the barrier around the police station lobby and isolating almost as thoroughly as if it had become another world. If a tank were to open fire inside the lobby now, no one outside would hear a thing.

At the same time, several demon beasts and several dozen evil spirits were summoned around Assassin, and pounced on the "intruder" the chief had designated with unmistakable hostility.

Should I make that priest a target too? The chief wondered, glancing toward a corner of the lobby.

He could see the eye patched priest pouring coffee from a siphon on the reception desk into a paper cup, apparently unconcerned with the situation.

No. He can wait.

The chief clicked his tongue in annoyance, and turned his eyes back to Assassin, who was unleashing fresh hair-tentacles from near the ceiling.

The evil spirits fluttered through the air, and the panther-like demon beasts circled Assassin, walking upside down on the ceiling. They would all pounce simultaneously, and the officers with long-range Noble Phantasms would fire in unison, shooting through spirits, demon beasts and all.

It was a brute force approach, but it would be enough to measure whether or not their attacks would work on the Heroic Spirit.

The chief recited a brief incantation to control his familiars, and the evil spirits lunged toward Assassin in unison. The officers readied their Noble Phantasms. Then...

"...Ichor of Reverie: Zabaniya..."

No one in the lobby caught the black-robed figure's murmur. Just as only one other person could hear the "song" that emanated a moment later from Assassin's throat.

"Ugh! What the—?"

Hansa had been about to sip his coffee — now lukewarm due to the blackout — when the cup nearly slipped through his fingers. He pressed his hands over his ears, and turned to look at the source of the sound. He could see that the Heroic Spirit was indeed singing through an opening in the explosion of hair.

Narrowing his eye, Hansa attempted to rationally analyze the sound.

“Well now... this lady’s got a range most people can’t hear.”

As he said, the noise was inaudible to the chief and his officers. But that didn’t mean their bodies were deaf to Assassin’s song.

Soon, it’s results began to register in their eyes.

“Ngh...?”

The chief sensed an unusual heat coming from his own magic circuits. At the same time, the scene around him began to spin drunkenly.

What? What’s happening to me?

The change sprung on the chief and his officers before they could grasp what was happening.

“Wha—?”

One of the officers was being attacked by a demon beast. He caught its fangs on his curved sword.

It was more than just the one beast. All the familiars that should have been attacking Assassin were beginning to lash out at the surrounding police officers.

And that was not all. The officers themselves were unsteady on their feet, as if they — like their chief — were experiencing something like vertigo.

“She’s... making our magic circuits go out of control...!”

Despite his faltering legs, the chief managed to call off the beasts. An instruction to his familiars was enough. If he had tried to use offensive magecraft, the magical energy would likely have escaped his control and destroyed his own body.

It probably has a direct effect on the brain of even a non-mage.

It was possible that the reason for their intoxicated state had nothing to do with magic circuits — that something had delivered a direct shock to their brains — but at the very least it seemed to be entirely separate from the hair-extending technique.

I was careless. She must have two assassination techniques worthy of the title “Noble Phantasm.”

The woman Assassin leapt from atop the lighting fixture, thrusting at a newly-created opening in the officers’ ranks. At the same time, the hair spread throughout the lobby began to converge. It was being sucked back into the black robes that covered her head.

The black-robed shadow leapt from pillar to pillar, seeming to ignore gravity. It was the same way she had moved at the opera house, and like then, it looked to anyone who saw like she had split into countless copies.

And, like at the opera house... she leapt out behind the man who appeared to be leading the police officers with the force of a cannonball.

“Chief! Behind you!”

“!”

The chief swiftly turned, reacting to his subordinate’s shout. He narrowly evaded the assassin’s hand closing in on him.

It landed on the head of the berserk demon beast that had stopped in front of him. Then...

“Cyber Fantasy: Zabaniya...”

The Heroic Spirit whispered, and, at almost the same instant, the beast’s head burst apart.

“...!”

Was that... another Noble Phantasm? Just how many does she...?

The chief groaned inwardly, but it did not look like Assassin was going to give him time to think rationally. She used the force of the explosion to flip over, and a weirdly elongated arm stretched towards him from her back.

“Delusional Heartbeat: Zabaniya...”

“Ngh!”

Seeing the length of his opponent’s arm, the chief judged that even if he drew back, it would still overtake him.

In which case... my only option is to cut through it! He judged, and drew his katana.

Its edge sliced into the long, warped appendage, but Assassin kept coming. She stretched out her hand to the chief’s body, heedless of the blade lodged in her arm. Her fingertips were mere inches from the chief’s chest, when...

A loud gunshot sounded, and Assassin was sent flying.

“...Are you unharmed, sir?”

When the chief turned to look, he found his secretary aiming a large revolver. It was clearly not police issue. Based on what it had done to the Heroic Spirit, it must have been another Noble Phantasm.

The weapon ought to have been too modern to qualify, but the potent magical energy seeping out of it seemed to declare that it had existed since the age of the gods.

Not even a Heroic Spirit could take a bullet fired from such a gun and emerge unscathed. Or so the police thought.

Witnessing the black-robed assassin return nimbly to her feet, they readied themselves for more.

The chief called out to the enemy Heroic Spirit, putting distance between them and keeping his eyes trained on her all the while.

“I’m surprised. It seems your Master isn’t stingy with Noble Phantasms. Judging by the number you just used in a row, they must be a mage with considerable reserves of energy. Ask your

Master if they would be willing to form a united front against Gilgamesh.”

The chief considered that it was probably useless, but he proposed an alliance anyway in hopes of gauging his opponent’s personality. Even if they refused, sounding out the relationship between this Heroic Spirit and her Master might point him toward a way to resolve the situation.

“You must have noticed the battle in the desert yesterday. Don’t you think that eliminating those freaks would be to our common benefit? Ask your Master that.”

Assassin’s answer, however, was nothing the chief had anticipated.

“...I have no Master.”

The voice of a young woman came from beneath the black robes. The chief already knew from her earlier whisper — presumably the name of a Noble Phantasm — but some of the officers blinked in surprise.

“I have no wish to serve a mage. Nor do I desire the Holy Grail.”

“What?”

The chief was dubious. Assassin’s dark eyes showed clear determination.

“I will smash the Holy Grail War, which has lead the great chiefs astray,” she declared, further increasing her alertness to the enemies surrounding her.

Thanks to Febrile Inspiration: Zabaniya, which made her skin as hard as Demon Realm Crystal, she had suffered no direct damage from the bullet. But magical energy was rapidly leaking from her body where it had struck. Perhaps it was an effect of the Noble Phantasm.

If the bullet had actually penetrated flesh and made a deep wound, it would have depleted an average Heroic Spirit’s magical energy on the spot.

As they fight... they are adjusting to their Noble Phantasms.

A mere few minutes of battle had convinced her that she was fighting humans, not Heroic Spirits. Their Noble Phantasms, however, were unmistakably genuine.

She did not know or care how humans were able to wield Noble Phantasms, but it appeared that they were not used to using them in actual combat. Even during this short battle, however, she could tell that their bodies were acclimatizing. The more they fought, the more power they would draw from their Noble Phantasms.

Even restricting her attention to nearby weapons, the power of their strikes and slashes was beginning to rise. Some had even begun to display traits unimaginable in ordinary weapons, such as a blade that emitted flames from its edge.

I can’t let them draw out this battle.

She had no reason to enter into negotiations. She pondered how best to utilize the chiefs’



techniques in this situation. She no longer needed to listen to anything her opponent said.

Or so she thought.

“Don’t be ridiculous. An Archer with the Independent Action skill would be one thing, but if you fought like you just did without a Master, you would have vanished a long time ago.”

“...”

The words of the man who appeared to be leading the enemy group tugged at her mind.

She had wondered about it herself. She had been racing around the city for two whole days without rest, and mostly without dematerializing. But she still had not vanished. She was still brimming with magical energy...

She had been thinking that her own immaturity had prevented her from properly channeling energy into the techniques that comprised her Noble Phantasm.

No. That doesn’t matter now. The enemy in front of me comes first...

The woman Assassin tried to drive her doubts into a corner of her mind, and re-adjust it for combat. Those questions, however, were about to be answered.

With nearly the worst answer she could imagine.

“Splendid! A mudslinging contest after my own heart!”

Without warning, the sound of clapping, and a strangely cheerful voice, echoed through the lobby.

The voice was powerful, and made everyone who heard it feel like they were suffocating. Each clap caused a tension like the distant report of a sniper rifle.

“Who goes there?” The chief called out, looking around. But the owner of the voice was nowhere to be seen. In fact, he had a feeling it was coming from the station’s parking lot — outside the barrier.

But that should have been impossible; the lobby was totally isolated from the outside world. The police turned to look at the front entrance in spite of themselves.

Almost as if it had been waiting for that, an abnormality appeared in the barrier. It’s influence had turned the entrance pitch black, but now an index finger ran vertically down the glass part of the door... almost as if it was making an incision.

A young man appeared through the door, seeming to push open the gap his finger had made.

“I’ve been spectating from outside. Truly a splendid fight,” the young man declared, energetically clapping.

The police officers looked at each other. The chief, representing his subordinates, repeated his question.



“...Who are you?”

The young man, however, ignored the chief’s words, and continued to monologue sonorously.

“Magnificent. You really are superb. I don’t know what trick you’re using, but really, mere humans challenging a Heroic Spirit! I’ll admit I thought you were biting off more than you could chew, but I’ll be damned if it isn’t shaping up to be a wonderful bout!” Stifling a chuckle, the young man spread his arms wide and began to walk into the center of the lobby. “A lovely fool of a Heroic Spirit who attacks openly despite possessing the art of living in the shadows, versus a mage who leaves his Heroic Spirit behind and puts himself in the line of fire. Quite an entertaining show.”

“...”

The chief wordlessly scrutinized the man, still ignorant of his identity. He received no visual information as a Master, so the man was clearly not a Heroic Spirit. He must be Assassin’s Master, then, but Assassin was distancing herself from the man, and seemed confused.

Another Heroic Spirit’s Master, then?

Either way, the fact that he had torn through the barrier so easily meant that he had real power.

The chief decided to keep his guard up, and continued listening to the man’s monologue — while making sure that the words did not contain some kind of kotodama or incantation — in hopes of learning something.

The young man, utterly unconcerned by the tense atmosphere, began to opine like an excitable spectator at a baseball game.

“Let me see... In my humble opinion, if you keep going like this, around the time she’s slaughtered seven tenths of you, the remaining officers will fully accept their Noble Phantasms as parts of themselves, and awaken. Once that happens, the odds will be fifty-fifty. But if even one mage capable of seeing through the nature of her Noble Phantasm remains, the scales will tip in favor of the ladies and gentlemen of the police.” After taking the initiative to forecast the flow of the battle, the young man continued: “Exquisite. I mean that. If you make use of your experience in this battle, and manage to replenish your numbers, then you may indeed be able to fight Classes for the battle-mad, like Saber or Archer, head-on.”

He did not seem to be an ally, at least, but the chief could not be certain he was an enemy. He might work for Faldeus or Francesca. But that possibility was not enough to make the chief let down his guard.

One officer gingerly approached the man, pointing his Noble Phantasm dagger in an attempt to stop him from moving. Then...

“However.”

The young man lightly brushed aside the officer’s hand, dagger and all, with his left arm. Squelch.

There was an unpleasant, wet sound. Then the chief bore witness to an uncanny scene. The officer’s hand below the wrist was gone, almost like it had been bitten off.

“What the...?”

The officer stared at the blood gushing from his wrist, his face a mask of confusion.

“I’m stumped for a death worthy of concluding such a fine match.”

The young man was still smiling. He was also holding the officer’s severed hand.

That was when the officer realized what had happened to him. He became aware of the pain at the same time. His scream echoed through the lobby, just a little bit late.

“...Ah... AaaHHhh... AAaaAAaaahhhhhhh!”

“Ha ha! That’s a good scream, if a bit conventional. Will you give me a more entertaining one if I cut off your left hand too?”

“That’s far enough!”

Seeing his subordinate clutch his own wrist and fall to his knees, the chief fired his gun without hesitation. Like the one he had fired at the ceiling earlier, it was a special round designed to activate the surrounding traps and magical energy reactors.

“Team two surround the man! The rest of you keep your eyes on the Heroic Spirit!”

Countless evil spirits and demon beasts emerged from the mystic formulas built into the floor in time with the chief’s order, letting out eerie cries. No sooner had they pounced on the young man, however, than...

“Don’t twitter so; it’s revolting,” the young man muttered without dropping his carefree grin. He lowered the fingers of his right hand, and slowly looked up.

As he did so, all the newborn familiars were crushed by an unseen something, and burst against the floor like water balloons.

“Wha—?”

The chief and all his officers were speechless.

There was no sign that the man had used offensive magecraft. It was almost as if the twisted pressure he gave off had rejected the familiars’ very existence. In fact, his mere presence made the officers’ skin shiver with fear, and they did not know why.

He was just standing there.

The man lightly squeezed the officer’s right hand, which he still held in his left. An instant later it was as dry and withered as a mummy. Then it crumbled to dust and vanished without a trace.

If that was not enough, he picked up the dagger the hand had been holding, and brought it to his lips. He took a bite out of it like it was a cookie. Then, just like that, he poured the fragments down his throat.

“Hmm... This texture... Truly a delicacy worth of the title ‘Noble Phantasm.’ A toy like this is too much for a human.”

What the police officers had just seen was hard to believe. They were sure now:

The man was not human.

He was not even a Heroic Spirit.

He was a “thing” on a different level entirely.

In the now-silent lobby, the man spread his hands as if giving silent thanks. Then he faced the bewildered Assassin with an air of reverence, and kneeled.

“A bit late for self introductions, wouldn’t you agree, my dear?”

“...?”

Inside her black robes, Assassin furrowed her brows in confusion.

“My name is Jester Karture. As your Master, I will affirm all that you are...”

At the word “Master,” an additional tension ran through the surrounding humans.

The young man who called himself Jester pasted a fiendish grin on his face, and stared up at Assassin. His gaze seemed to lick every inch of her body.

“And as an inhuman Dead Apostle, I will take all that you are.”

Dead Apostle.

Assassin felt her whole body shudder at those words. Not with fear of the monstrosities called “vampires”; because she had come to the worst possible conclusion about the situation she had been placed in.

Aimless bearers of death.

Messengers of destruction that drive out humans.

She had never met a Dead Apostle face to face while she was alive, but she had heard tell of them. Every time a great war with the infidels broke out, terrible monsters appeared on the battlefield to rain destruction indiscriminate of creed. At the time of the first great war, it was said, a monster that kept countless beasts in its body had stained the desert with blood. At the time of the second, several monsters — different from the first one — had come, and only gone after they had raged for three days and three nights. When the third war came, yet another monster had appeared, but apparently it had been slain by the ruthless generals of both factions. All she could be sure of, however, was that every one of those monsters had been a herald of slaughter that resented the very existence of the human race. And that they had been called Dead Apostles.



The man had called himself by that grotesque name. What else had he said?

My... Master...?

A chill ran down Assassin's spine.

Impossible. I'm sure I... dealt with... my Master...

As though he had glimpsed her thoughts, the man who called himself Jester Karture rubbed his own chest with an almost ecstatic expression.

"I'll never forget the touch of your palm, like a stern kiss. It seized my heart. Dying once was such a shock even my face changed."

"...!"

Jester's words confirmed her fears. This was indeed the man she believed she had killed.

Then... I still exist because this monster... is sharing his magical energy with me...?

An irrepressible disgust raced through her. It felt like every drop of her blood had been defiled by toxic sludge.

An inhuman thing.

And that was not all. The little she had heard of her speech and conduct was enough to tell her that this man was a danger to all humankind.

The fact that such a creature's energy was flowing through her was unpardonable. She detested her own immaturity for failing to even notice that she had been collared by a Dead Apostle so much she could not bear it. Before she knew it, she was stepping forward, determined to at least cleanse that impurity herself. Determined to destroy the monster before her eyes, and purify herself.

She also felt an impulse to destroy herself, but that was forbidden by her faith. She felt ashamed — even thinking of such a thing was proof of her immaturity — and tried to focus all her energies on eliminating her Master — her enemy.

But...

"...By my Command Seal, I order you: Go as far from this city as possible," Jester said, grinning.

At the same time, Assassin's body gave off light.

"...!"

Assassin tried to shout something, but before she had the chance, the light enveloped her entire body.

And just like that, she was gone.

Jester surveyed the remaining police officers, shrugged, and declared:

"I suppose this is what they call 'passing the baton.' I need the Holy Grail too, you know?"

What I mean to say is...

“Why don’t you blood bags hurry up and drop dead?”

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Somewhere in the city.

“A Dead Apostle...? A Dead Apostle! A Vampire! Seriously?”

Caster, listening to the voices from his computer screen, clapped his hands in surprise.

Communicators were built into some of the police officers’ Noble Phantasms. He was not, properly speaking, a mage, so they were a bit of a stopgap measure, but he had gone through the motions and, with the addition of his Noble Phantasm Modification skill, he had managed to complete them. They were now functioning more as bugs than as communicators, but Caster considered that part of his after-sales service, and felt no real guilt about using them.

“Things just keep gettin’ more interesting. But are there too many unbelievable bits for a play? Oh, who cares? I’m just here to watch and heckle this time around.” Caster’s expression grew more serious, and his voice dropped to a mutter. “But this might be bad news for my bro and his crew.”

Caster sighed. He was reminded of something that had happened when he was alive.

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Paris, the first half of the 19th century.

A time when a young Caster had only just arrived in Paris. When, out of a desire to see genuine Parisian drama, he had visited a certain theater in Saint-Martin.

The title of the play was *Le Vampire*.

After getting caught up in trouble several times, he had finally managed to reach his seat. Sitting next to him, however, was a rather eccentric man. Just when he seemed to be totally engrossed in reading a book, he would raise his head and jeer, “You call that a vampire? Rubbish!” or grumbled, “These actors lack imagination and creativity...”

Caster thought it odd for a man about twenty years his senior to make a fuss about such things. In the end, he decided to ask the man directly.

“If you don’t like fairy tales like vampires, then what are you doing here?”

The man shook his head once and answered:

“Vampires, a fairy tale? Preposterous! They actually exist. I’ve met them. That’s why I was looking forward to this play. But just look at it! You call that a performance? They don’t understand the first thing about vampires, and they’re not even trying to!”

I’ve ended up next to an amusing fellow, Caster thought. He decided to ignore the play and ask the man about vampires.

“I met the first one in Illyria. Night after night, I ended up conversing and dining with a living, walking corpse.”

“Dining?”

“We didn’t sip blood together, if that’s what you’re getting at. Ordinary meals... But he wished to die as a man. I heard his wish. While he was sleeping in the graveyard — while he was dead — I took out his heart and burned it. But it was only later that I met a ‘vampire’ in the true sense. One with more power came to see the man who’d broken bread with, and given eternal slumber to, a vampire.”

The man stared into the distance as he spoke, as if he missed the past. After he had related his back and forth with the “powerful vampire” for a while, he uttered the vampires’ other name.

“They’re called Dead Apostles, and they’re obviously different from evil spirits or fairies that possess people. Despite being part of the Earth, they despise humanity. In fact, they are the planet’s own shadows, with wills of their own.”

“They hate people?”

“Yes, they do. I can’t speak for every Dead Apostle, of course, but there is a clear wall between them and humans. A manmade blade could never penetrate it. Only a blade consecrated by God, or some other ‘power’ of the same kind, can pierce them. In any case, if you think of them as just another kind of ghost or demon, you’re very much mistaken.”

“You’re saying the ‘vampire’ in this play is just an evil spirit...? But I suppose that’s only to be expected, if the actors have never seen a real vampire.”

“You don’t have to have seen one to play one. Human imagination enables anyone to arrive at an illusion,” the man responded in a calm tone.

He went on to regale the youngster seated next to him and “eager to learn” on a variety of other topics, from various accounts of his own experiences, to the makeup of the city of Paris, to tales of the emperor Nero and literary recommendations. His conversation was unmistakably backed by experience. At some point, Caster ended up hanging on the man’s words, rather than on the play.

After a while, however, the man glanced back at the stage. His face changed color, and he began to heckle the actors again.

“Oh, not like that! They’re not ghosts that make you pale with mere terror!”

Suddenly the man announced, “I’m moving to a seat where it’s easier to protest!” and rose from his chair.

“Oh yes. Fate must have a hand in this. Tell me your name.”

Caster answered, a little embarrassed to be asked by a man old enough to be his father.

“My name is Dumas... Alexandre Dumas.”

“Is that so? My name is Charles. God willing, we will meet again.”

As he watched the man’s retreating back, the youth prayed that he would indeed see that fascinating man again.

Although Caster — Alexandre Dumas — did not know it then, the man he had just been speaking to was one of the most famous authors in France, and had written one of the works that formed the basis for this *Le Vampire*.

He was also the one who would later introduce Caster to the literary world.

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The present.

“Ah... I was sure Mr. Charles would be in the Throne, since the likes of me got there. I wonder why not. I was always indebted to the man...”

Caster muttered words that evinced a fundamentally different respect from those he used to his Master, then hurriedly turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

“Oh man, if he really is a vampire, they haven’t got a prayer with their current gear.”

Sighing, Caster made his keyboard clatter.

“Right now they’re customized to boost ‘human power’... But... a vampire — a Dead Apostle — well...” Caster muttered, laughing self-deprecatingly as he fiddled with the bits of data that appeared one after another on his computer screen.

“But man, to think I’d actually get mixed up with them... Ya live and learn. ‘Course, I’m already dead.”

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The police station. Corridor.

Saber was walking down a corridor in an area a long way from the lobby, when he suddenly stopped, and turned to look at something. He was staring in the direction of the lobby where the chief and his officers were fighting, but he had no way of knowing that.

“What’s the matter?” Ayaka asked.

Saber narrowed his eyes slightly, and answered:

“...I sense the presence of a monster.”

“A monster?”

“...Yes. It’s an old story.” There was a hint of sadness in his expression, rare for a man who usually exuded a wild air. “It was during a war. Monsters forced their way into a battle between me and my rival, slaughtering men of both camps. I sense a similar presence now.”

“I don’t really get it, but does that mean a monster got summoned as a Heroic Spirit?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s not a Heroic Spirit. I don’t know whether or not they can even go to the Throne in the first place.”

Saber, experiencing a sense of foreboding, determined to be more wary of his surroundings and get Ayaka outside as fast as he could. He recalled those monsters’ peculiarities as he began to walk, and continued:

“To make a long story short... in your culture, they would probably be called ‘vampires.’”

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The police station. Lobby.

“Just checking,” Jester’s voice resounded through the lobby, “but are you sure you don’t want to call in the Servant who gave you those Noble Phantasms? Then again, if making Noble Phantasms is their primary ability, I doubt they’d be much good in a fight scene.”

He had yet to move a single step since saying “Why don’t you blood bags hurry up and drop dead?”

In spite of that, numerous police officers lay fallen around him. There had been no fatalities yet, but that was hardly surprising. After all, the Dead Apostle who called himself Jester had yet to launch a single attack.

The female officer on the third floor drew her bow back to its limit, her aim fixed on him, and loosed three golden arrows simultaneously. They inscribed a triplicate curve as they sped



towards Jester's heart at nearly the speed of sound. As the arrows approached him, however, their radiance began to dim. By the time they reached him, they were ordinary iron arrows, which bounced off Jester without so much as ripping his suit.

He had not moved at all. The arrows had been thwarted by his skin.

It was not as though he had turned to steel, or sprouted scales like a dragon; the mach-speed bow had failed to penetrate what appeared to be nothing more than soft, fair, human skin.

And that was not all. The officers had the feeling that the more they attacked the man called Jester, the more their own strength was sapped.

An axe-wielder who had begun to draw out the power of his Noble Phantasm fired off a "slash that ignores distance to cut down the enemy"... but, while he could feel the attack connect, he could not manage to knock so much as a single hair on Jester's head out of place.

"R, raaahhh!"

An officer who boasted a massive body hefted his greatshield and charged, but all the force of it rebounded onto him, like he had crash into a giant wall, and he was the one who ended up injured.

All of the nearly thirty police officers piled on attacks with their Noble Phantasms. Jester just ignored them all and continued to condescendingly editorialize.

Fear began to bud in the officers' eyes. A moment before they had been taking on a Heroic Spirit assassin. They were certain they had been able to put up a proper fight. So what was going on? A monster called a "Dead Apostle" that shouldn't even have had anything to do with the Grail War was completely dominating the battlefield. What was a Heroic Spirit, and who were they, trying to defeat one, if a monster this strong already existed, and didn't even have to be summoned from the Throne?

Jester, still smirking, reveled in their looks of fear and despair.

"Don't misunderstand; I am by no means stronger than a Heroic Spirit. Actually, that lovely Assassin even killed me once."

The police force furrowed their brows in confusion, even as they fell to their knees from the mysterious exhaustion. Only five of them, including the chief and his secretary, still retained their full fighting spirit, but their attacks showed no signs of affecting Jester either.

The remaining officers charged with all their might, under the protection of a Noble Phantasm spear. But Jester, with the speed of a predator's fangs, stopped the spearpoint with just his index finger.

"In other words," Jester viewed the smashed spear and despair-filled officers with a pitying smile, "Heroic Spirits affirm human history. They exist to preserve the rules of the human world." Jester gave a little shake of his head, toying with a splinter of the spear between his fingertips.

“We Dead Apostles deny human history. We exist to defile your rules.”

“You deny... human history?”

“Yes, that’s right. And therefore, we are capable of negating the protection of Noble Phantasms created by humans, or those prepared for humans by the gods. A Noble Phantasm created by a god for a god might be a different story, but you can’t get your hands on one of those so easily. It’s purely a question of compatibility. I’m a snake and you’re frogs. That’s all there is to it.”

Jester finally started walking. He meant to perform the coup de grâce, now that the atmosphere of the lobby had begun to fill with negativity.

“Of course, if a Heroic Spirit, an emissary of the Throne, were to use the same Noble Phantasms, it would be another story. A Heroic Spirit could probably have beaten me. But no matter what you mere humans do with them, your defeat is inevitable. It’s not the kind of thing you can overcome with tactics or fighting spirit.”

A Heroic Spirit could probably have beaten me.

To the police officers, those were words, not of hope, but of despair. Because they had abandoned the path of relying on a Heroic Spirit, and chosen human strength... they were being overwhelmed, not by any Heroic Spirit, but by a monster. The officers grit their teeth in the face of that almost comical reality.

But even so, their spirits remained unbroken.

Because their chief was still standing in the center of the lobby, as if to proclaim that he was their last bastion. Their last remaining chance in human form.

Jester must have noticed that too. He walked slowly toward the chief, grinning fearlessly, and asked:

“You know what it is you lack?”

“...Power?” The chief seriously answered Jester’s question, gripping his katana in one hand and his pistol in the other.

Jester, however, shook his head, and announced the correct answer.

“Respect.”

“...”

“I can tell. You don’t believe in any higher beings, let alone gods. Not Heroic Spirits, not the Throne, maybe not even the Holy Grail. And because you don’t believe in your own power, you try to rely on tools. There’s no respect in that.”

Smirking, Jester suddenly lifted up a nearby couch in one hand. With the sofa — now a three-meter long blunt instrument — in hand, he announced to the lobby:

“I can’t teach you respect, but I can teach you how fleeting you really are. I’m going to smash in the head of your trusted ‘chief’ with this piece of furniture — not even a weapon. Then I’m

going to break the legs of everyone of you who tries to run, in order. I can break about ten at a time. If you all make a break for it on 'go,' a few of you might make it."

Cackling, Jester took another step closer to the chief. He was already in sofa range.

The chief sensed the approach of certain death, but he did not cry or wail. On the contrary, it honed his spirit.

It's the same. It makes no difference whether it's a Dead Apostle or the King of Heroes walking towards me.

He was up against Heroic Spirits of unparalleled strength. The possibility of his own death was already accounted for.

But I won't go down without a fight, monster.

The chief cleared his mind. At the same time, he dropped his gun to the floor, and gripped his sword in both hands.

"Oh-ho..." Jester, sensing a change in the atmosphere, momentarily halted his steps, and relaxed his lips. "I see. Determined to get in a hit as a human to the bitter end, are you? I'd had you pegged as the type to grasp at life by relying on your Command Seals and using your Servant as a shield. But your resolve won't do you any good. Nothing will get through to me."

Jester stifled a chuckle as he swung the couch up.

"I am curious about the Heroic Spirit behind you, but hey, I'll just eat you and help myself to your Command Seals. It would be impossible under normal circumstances, but as I am now I can use two — no, up to five — Servants at—"

Splash.

Jester suddenly stopped in mid-sentence. He been showered with a black liquid from behind without warning.

"..."

There was no need to wonder what the liquid was. The aroma clinging to his clothes was enough to tell him that it was lukewarm coffee.

Jester turned with a dumbfounded look, and...

"Nothing will get through to you, huh?"

A few meters away stood a priest, holding a paper cup and flashing a fearless grin.

"The coffee sure did."

When he saw that he was facing a priest, Jester wiped the smile from his face, and muttered in annoyance.

"I see. You must be the overseer of this Holy Grail War." He shook his head and sighed.

“Deplorable. I hastened to participate because I’d heard the Holy Church wouldn’t be involved, but it seems that in the end even this city wags its tail for—”

Splash.

The priest had waited for Jester to shake his head, and flung the remaining coffee at him.

“...”

“You talk too much, dead man.” The priest folded the paper cup, and tossed it into a nearby trashcan. “If this was an opera or a musical, I’d want to cut about half your lines.”

“Hansa Cervantes... You’re still here?”

Hansa heard the chief call his name, and shrugged.

“You look like you’re in a real fix, chief.”

“What’s your game?”

“As overseer, I thought I’d give you some tips for staying alive.” Hansa matter-of-factly addressed the chief, indifferent to Jester, who was hanging his head in silence. “You can’t handle a Dead Apostle of his level unless you use specialized consecrated weapons... or you have a ‘singularity’ like mystic eyes or therianthropy, or else you’re just that good a mage.”

“...”

“You lot aren’t immature; it was just a bad matchup for you. Honestly, I think you did great against that Heroic Spirit earlier. Put on a good show for me.”

The priest frankly praised the chief and his officers.

Jester, once he had wiped the coffee from his face, which showed neither amusement nor anger, coldly declared:

“It appears you know a bit about Dead Apostles. Being overseer must put you in a position to hear about such things.”

Jester then dropped his gaze to his own suit.

“So? What do you mean by this?” He asked, pinching a piece of coffee-stained fabric.

“My treat. Sip it instead of these civil servants’ blood.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! Your treat! I see!”

Jester burst into laughter. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed, and...

The next instant, his grin turned upside down, and he hurled the couch at the priest.

“It’s free coffee from the reception desk!”

The sofa closed in on the priest, rotating with the speed and force of a boomerang.

The priest did not even try to dodge the flying sofa... He just kicked it straight up.

There was a thunderous roar. A little later, a crash could be heard from the direction of the ceiling. When the police officers looked up, they could see the couch was stuck deep into the ceiling of the lobby’s three-story atrium.

“...What?”

The chief, his secretary, his officers, and even Jester, who had thrown the couch in the first place, could not take their eyes off the superhuman feat.

The next instant... Hansa vanished without a trace.

“...huh?”

Jester let out a confused grunt. The priest he was sure had been a few meters away until a moment before was right in front of him swinging a fist before he knew it.

Then Hansa's right fist plowed into Jester's face, just a little faster than Jester could react. Jester went flying through the walls of the lobby and into an inner room.

“...I meant to knock his head off, but it's as hard as you'd expect.”

Hansa wagged his limp hand. The chief narrowed his eyes.

“What's your game?”

Hansa had a ready answer.

“What they call ‘passing the baton.’ I'll get rid of him.”

“Do you mean you're going to help us?”

“I'm a priest before I'm an overseer,” the priest answered the suspicious chief while cricking his neck. “But, well... there is something I'd like in exchange.”

“What is it?”

“Don't tell the church about my wasting drink.”

“I'm scared of getting chewed out by master.”



## Chapter 4

### “A Battle Without Heroic Spirits”

## **Chapter 4: Day 1, Before Dawn**

### **A Battle Without Heroic Spirits**

About twenty years ago.

It happened when an aging priest called Dilo had just been appointed to a mountainous region of Spain. Having heard mountain climbers' tales of evil spirits in the mountains, the priest went up into them himself... and came upon a lone boy sitting and eating something with the lynxes on the mountainside.

"What are you eating, boy?" He asked.

The boy glared warily at him, and leapt away over the cliffs without a word.

The villagers who had been guiding the priest screamed, "A monster! He must have been eating a climber who got lost in the mountains!" and fled, but the priest himself decided to follow the boy.

He soon learned that it was no human the boy had been eating. Ahead on the path lay the carcass of a large bear, and beside it traces of someone making jerky.

So he dries his meat. Humph. Doesn't sound like any kind of demon beast to me, the priest thought, and pressed on.

The boy who had run earlier stood in his way.

"Are you a person, old man? Or are you a goblin?"

There was still something of the child in the boy who had come to ask such an odd question. The priest responded with interest.

"I wonder now. From my perspective, I'm a person, but I might be a goblin from yours. I don't know whether you're a person or a goblin either."

"..."

"But, man or monster, don't you think we might be able to get along?"

Dilo patiently kept up his attempts to make contact in hopes that his words would get through. As he went on, little by little the boy began to talk about himself.

The Caminito Del Rey is said to be the most dangerous path on earth. To hear the boy tell it, the path up ahead — hidden by the mountain road — that lead to the ruins where he lived alone might give that cliff trail a run for its money.

When asked about his family, he replied that until recently it had been a community — practically a village — of several dozen people.

"Are there goblins that get along with people outside the mountains?"

"Yes. The world is vast; look for something, and it's there. There are probably even goblins

that make families with people.”

The old priest’s words sounded strange coming from a man of God.

“That so? The goblin I saw didn’t look very friendly, though.”

“?”

In a matter-of-fact tone, the boy told what he had seen.

“Everybody on the mountain... got killed by a goblin that sucked blood.”

“...”

“The goblin got killed too, in the end. By mom. But she died from the wounds she got then.”

The old priest deliberately probed no deeper.

After several more trips to the mountains, he decided to bring the boy to town.

Several months later.

The boy had been living for a while in an orphanage, and had thoroughly adapted to village living, when a new priest came to town. He was a little younger than Dilo, with a languid face and in the prime of his life.

The unfamiliar priest grumbled to Dilo in front of Hansa, who had called to the orphanage’s garden.

“That is, umm... Bishop Dilo... Why me?”

“Well, of all my acquaintances, you seem the best at kung fu and martial arts. I hear this boy is fond of such things. Such a strong lad will learn the importance of harmony more readily from someone stronger than himself. Don’t you think so?”

Hansa realized that this priest who did his best not to meet anyone’s eyes had been called to the town because of him. It must have something to do with what had happened the other day. He had said that he would like to do what he had done when he lived in the mountains, gotten the nearby children involved, and come close to badly hurting one of them as a result.

He had gone and made trouble for Mr. Dilo.

Hansa felt despondent at the thought, when the priest, still not meeting anyone’s eyes, addressed Dilo again.

“Umm, say, Your Excellency? If this is about training a child in martial arts, wouldn’t Father Kotomine do as well? His Baji Quan is master level. He’s also a close friend of yours.”

“I hear Risei has undertaken an important task in Japan. I’m hardly an expert in that field, but apparently it’s very important. Besides, he already has a son.”

“Oh... Are you, perhaps, implying that I’m to look after him as if he were my own son...?”

“You said you wanted a capable successor, didn’t you? Well, this boy is physically stronger than most, and he’s a fast learner. Teach him the proper way to use his strength.”

“...Are you sure you aren’t looking for a dojo instructor?”

The strange priest heaved a sigh, then called out to Hansa.

“You want some pocket money?”

“Can I?”

“Yeah. I’ll give it to you, if you can ‘take’ it,” the priest said without looking at him... and launched a foreign silver coin with the force of a bullet.

*Good grief. The bishop must not know my other face, or he wouldn’t have asked so nonchalantly...*

That silver coin should have passed by about a meter to one side of Hansa, and embedded itself in the wood inside.

*Still, I’d definitely feel guilty about dragging a child into it.*

Dilo’s acquaintance apparently assumed that, if he startled the boy a little, he would refuse on his own. However...

At the same time he fired, the boy leapt towards the silver coin, and neatly caught it. The coin that had been launched with enough force to penetrate wood. With his bare hand.

“...Hm?”

For the first time, the middle-aged priest looked at the boy.

The boy looked at the coin in his hand with sparkling eyes and an innocent grin.

“Wow! A silver coin! Thank you, Father!”

Dilo watched the scene with an amiable grin, and added more information about the boy.

“The trainer at the local martial arts gym informed me that he can’t handle the boy there.” It must have been a response to his earlier remark about a “dojo instructor.” Still wearing a kind-hearted smile, the old priest continued: “After all, in normal martial arts, he might well stop his opponent’s heart without even getting serious.”

After he had looked the boy over for a while, the middle-aged priest asked the boy:

“Umm, well... Would you mind telling me your name?”

“It’s Hansa,” The boy promptly identified himself.

Meeting his eye, the priest gave his own name.

“I’m Delmio Cervantes... Umm, pleased to meet you.”

Twenty years passed.

The old priest Dilo had only wished him a “healthy life.” His foster father Delmio had simply wished to see what would happen if he trained a child with his unusual physique. After many twists and turns, he had ended up granting both wishes.

The mountain-reared boy grew up healthy and strong, singing life’s praises. Strangely, he had taken up an occupation connected to the monsters that had attacked his village — the Dead



Apostles.

He became an executor, one who eliminates beings of absolute evil in God's stead.

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The present. The police station lobby.

"I was careless... quite careless..." Jester's low laugh echoed from beyond the demolished wall. "Yes! I admit it: I was careless just now! So this is what they call 'conceit'! What a wonderful experience! It must be true that 'conceit' is the poison that shortens the lives of the strong!"

Eerily, only his voice could be heard. The chief and his officers were watching events play out with bated breath. Hansa, however, planted himself right in front of the hole, and spoke.

"Don't be so humble. You weren't the least bit careless. You're always going all out. I respect that. Awesome."

"..."

"You were going all out when I socked you. Am I wrong?"

The laughter vanished at Hansa's obvious provocation.

"I can't stomach you, priest. Not one bit. Are you... an executor?"

*Executor.*

The chief knew of them as well. An armed group that claimed to represent God's power and judgment. Unlike exorcists, who only temporarily dispel their targets, executors made it their principal to completely annihilate evil spirits, demons, Dead Apostles, and other beings that, doctrinally speaking, ought not to exist. Naturally, it was a position to which only those with the power to challenge such entities were appointed. They served in a war utterly unlike the one for the Holy Grail.

"I'm on leave," Hansa coolly replied. "I'm here as overseer today."

The voice in the hole stopped. The next instant, countless bits of rubble launched from the hole in the wall.

If you told someone that an oversized cannon had been loaded with debris and fired, they would have believed you. In fact, they would have had difficulty believing anything else.

Hansa took several things that looked like sword hilts from his pocket, and tucked them between the fingers of both his hands. A moment later, silvery blades materialized on the hilts, and gave Hansa's hands silhouettes like giant claws.

Black Keys — Hilts that manifest blades when magical energy is passed through them. One



of an executor's essential armaments.

Without taking a breath, Hansa kicked off the floor, and met the rubble head-on. The priest's arms swayed like heat haze. A moment later, the rubble buckshot, which had included chunks of concrete a meter across, turned to mist and blew through his body.

To be more precise, it only appeared to blow through him. The rubble in front of Hansa was being had been smashed to dust piece by piece, and scattered through the lobby. What speed, what swordsmanship, must he have had to accomplish such a feat?

The chief just barely managed to follow the movements with his eyes, but if asked if he could have kept up with them, the answer would be no.

"No wonder you kept your cool when we had you surrounded," the chief muttered.

"Who knows?" Hansa answered without turning. "Your Noble Phantasms don't work on Dead Apostles, but they would on me. It all comes down to 'compatibility.' If specs decided everything, the Holy Grail War would be a scramble to summon Berserker."

True, the chief thought. He had received information that the Einzberns, in the fifth Holy Grail War, had summoned a great hero of the highest order as Berserker, using Mad Enhancement to raise its parameters. He did not know the particulars of the ensuing War, but at the very least he had received no intelligence suggesting that the Einzberns had obtained the Grail.

"The Einzberns always go to extremes," Francesca had said. "When they try to cheat and fail, next time the summon a great hero for a frontal assault. When that fails, they make another great hero Berserker and boost his stats as high as they can, and so on. Would it kill them to just lighten up and enjoy the war?"

Affinity mattered more than statistics in a Holy Grail War. It was essential to capitalize on the peculiarities of each Servant and Master. Often, even fortune had to be accounted for.

He could say that fortune was smiling on them now. It was a fact that they had been at odds with Hansa, and had not intended to let him return to the Church. Now, however, he thanked his lucky stars that the priest was not his enemy.

Hansa was about to stave off the umpteenth volley of rubble, when he glimpsed a fabric he recognized through a gap in the airborne debris. The instant he realized it was the suit Jester had been wearing, Hansa disposed of the largest of the rubble and crossed his Black Key "claws" in front of his heart, taking his chances with the rest.

Jester's knifehand thrust into that very spot with the force of a pile bunker.

Jester leapt again, trying to follow up his attack on Hansa, who had been flung backwards by the force of the impact. Hansa, on the other hand, attempted a counterattack of his own. Black Key blades and Dead Apostle claws clashed. As knifehand met blade, unbelievable meta-

llic clangs and the smell of burning flesh began to fill the room.

“A foolish choice, Hansa Cervantes! Does not defeating me mean abandoning your neutrality as overseer!? Do you imagine you can get away with this injustice!?”

“Well now, I never heard anything about you being a Master!”

They had reached a stalemate, each unleashing a succession of blows meant to pierce the other’s heart, only to be intercepted by his opponent’s. Their continued conversation in the midst of such a life and death struggle could have been an attempt to lure one of them into leaving an opening, or it could have been due to sheer excitement.

“I only just declared it before Assassin!”

“Oh really? It looked to me like the Servant wanted to deny your whole existence!”

“That only makes her... more beautiful!”

“Ha! That’s not an answer!”

Whether it was bravado, or some sort of perversion, the priest and the Dead Apostle both laughed as they fought. They leapt off columns and walls, using them as new footholds in their deathmatch. Cracks formed in the floor and columns with every leap, searing the fact that this battle was being fought on a superhuman plane into the watching eyes of the police. And the sight would only be restricted to them for a few more seconds.

Jester deliberately took a kick Hansa had thrown out as a feint. Using its force, he flung himself at the main entrance, smashed through the reinforced glass revolving door, and flew out into the city. It was as if he wanted to lure the executor outside, into the center of Snowfield.

It was not yet dawn, but there were countless people on the streets.

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Main Street. Near the casino.

“Hm...?”

A Cadillac convertible, ensconced in its characteristic high-class aura. Gilgamesh, sitting with a haughty air and resting his hands on the backs of the rear seats, furrowed his brows slightly as he turned his gaze to the road ahead.

A woman in black with a tense look on her face — Tine’s subordinate — was actually driving the car. Tine, who had dispelled her invisibility, sat, meek as a doll, in the passenger’s seat.

The car had been decked out as part of the casino’s decoration, but Gilgamesh had taken a

liking to it, and obtained it in exchange for half the chips from his big wins. The casino management had made a special exception for him. He had so many chips that he could have purchased any number of Cadillacs from a dealer if he had actually cashed them, so it had not been a bad deal for them, either. Gilgamesh had speedily completed the transfer process in the name of Tine's subordinate, and left the casino in high spirits.

But then he noticed the commotion up ahead.

Curious onlookers were gathering around the parking lot of a large building further up the road. From time to time, a loud crash rang out.

"...The police station," Tine muttered, staring in the same direction. She had also noticed that something was amiss.

Then several patrol cars, which had presumably been parked in the lot, soared into the air with a thunderous roar. And weren't those two human shapes weaving through the gaps between cars?

The outlandish scene put Tine on guard for a battle between Servants, but... however she looked at those shapes, she could not sense the characteristic presence of a Servant from either.

"Not Heroic Spirits...?"

Surprised, she employed far-viewing magecraft to observe the figures more closely.

"That's... the priest who was in the casino earlier, and... What is that other man?"

Tine looked to Gilgamesh for an answer. Gilgamesh, who could apparently see them with his naked eyes, answered in a tone that exuded confidence:

"Humph. I don't really know." He unabashedly declared his own ignorance, and went on to state his simple opinion. "I don't really know... but I can tell that it is no man. Probably a sort of large monster or apparition. If it stands in my way, I shall dispose of it, but I have no particular interest in it."

His Majesty probably doesn't take much interest in anything except humans, Tine considered. The divinity of his aura was also substantially more attenuated than it ought to be. When she had enquired about that, he had only said, "I have severed ties with that lot. I've no need of their protection," but she wondered if that attitude of his might have something to do with it.

As if to substantiate her conjecture, Gilgamesh seemed to take more interest in the priest. He was staring at the superhuman eye patched man.

"The depth of human sin, however, is quite stunning," he muttered.

"?"

The King of Heroes pasted an ironical grin on his face and continued, heedless of Tine's questioning stare in the rear view mirror.

“To think that that priest is not yet reduced to a tool of his god... with a body like that.”

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The police station. Parking lot.

Jester gave one of the airborne patrol cars a mighty kick. Hansa bisected it, and threw several Black Keys through the gap in its split frame. Jester stopped the blades by grabbing them, grinning fearlessly as blood and smoke leaked from his hands.

“We have an audience, you know? Whatever happened to keeping the Grail War a secret?”

“This ‘job’ has nothing to do with the War,” Hansa answered, using a car as a foothold to leap still higher, “so it won’t be a problem.”

Actually, as far as the Church was concerned, it was very much a problem. Perhaps Hansa had some kind of countermeasures in place, because he appeared unruffled by the curious stares of the crowd.

“You’re so set on ending me that you’d abandon your duties as overseer to do it? I already told you, but I am one of the Masters you’re supposed to protect.”

“...The Holy Church got involved in the Holy Grail War to conceal a miracle and to keep the peace for humankind. Would I be qualified to be its overseer if I allowed even the possibility of that miracle falling into the hands of a vampire?”

“So, you want to kill me that badly. Did you lose a parent or a lover to Dead Apostles?”

Hansa waited until they had crossed swords for a few seconds and landed back on the ground to answer the provocative question.

“Well, they did kill my whole clan... but to be honest, I don’t hold a grudge over that.”

While materializing the blades of fresh Black Keys, Hansa began to explain his reasons for fighting.

“It’s not like I hate all vampires. I may get told it makes me unfit to be an executor, but I don’t do this job out of hatred for Dead Apostles, or even faith in the Lord.”

“Then why are we trying to kill each other? What is the point of this battle?”

Gasoline that had leaked from a patrol car caught fire, and their surroundings were engulfed in flames. It was now dawn and there were more curious onlookers by the minute, but, miraculously, the eye-catching flames ended up hiding the pair from their view.

“You act and talk like a bad guy, however you look at it. That not good enough for you?”

“...Every single thing you do or say grates on my nerves. Do you mean to tell me you just kill Dead Apostles for fun, without any conviction? You’re as hideous as that Assassin is beautiful.”

Jester's mouth was smiling, but his eyes glared hate at Hansa. Hansa brushed off the Dead Apostle's hostility as he made his rebuttal.

"I don't mind overlooking a Dead Apostle who lives quietly and humbly, suppressing their urges. Speaking of which, I've heard there's a Dead Apostle who's obsessed with human food and resists their instincts to keep cooking... I wonder if it's true."

"How should I know?"

Jester spread his arms, wiped the smile from his face, then forcefully crossed them in front of him. A spray of blood flew from his hands. At the same time, a fierce wind sprang up, and formed a miniature tornado. Then, perhaps as a result of magecraft, the flames around him "merged" with the wind. It was not that the wind had fanned the flames and blown them up; it was like the air currents had actually become fire. The red whirlwind rushed at Hansa.

"Ngh...!"

Hansa barely dodged, wiping the smile from his face for the first time. He looked for Jester as the heat rushed on, but the Dead Apostle was already gone from where he had been standing.

Where'd he go?

As Hansa wondered and looked around, he left a momentary opening.

Jester did not miss it. He stuck a hand out from inside the flame tornado, and grabbed hold of Hansa's arm.

"!"

"Got you!"

The Dead Apostle pulled Hansa toward him with far more than human strength, and lashed out with his other hand to pierce Hansa's neck. Jester was certain that his knifehand would put an end to the executor before he had a chance to swing a Black Key with his free hand.

The next instant, however, his expectations were betrayed by Hansa's unanticipated counterattack.

Clang. A mechanical sound shook Jester's eardrums. A moment later, he realized that his hand that had been holding Hansa's arm had let go. Or rather, it had been pried off. A blade had slipped in from somewhere and sliced off all its fingers.

"...!"

Jester took a large step back and glared at Hansa, who leisurely picked up a Black Key.

Then he saw it.

The priest's sleeve was torn... and from beneath it sprouted a blade with the same properties as a Black Key.

"Damn you... A prosthetic arm!"



“Didn’t I mention? Seven tenths of my body are consecrated gadgets for taking on monsters like you.”

“I’m shocked. Who would have imagined that the Church had the technology?”

“The Church exists to guide people. Why wouldn’t it have the cutting edge in all technology and mystery? Not that I’d know much about it.”

Hansa spoke carelessly as he reviewed the chain of events that had just transpired. As he did so, he noticed that Jester’s fingers, which he was sure he had severed, were back on his hand. He had been putting it down to the characteristic regenerative powers of a Dead Apostle, but something told him that the way Jester healed was unlike the vampires he usually faced.

“That wind... Is that your power?”

“Sorry, but I’m a cautious man. I have no intention of explaining what I can do.”

Jester glared at Hansa in annoyance, then stabbed a hand into the body of a patrol car burning nearby and grabbed hold of its frame. Lifting up the whole car with one Hand, Jester hurled it at Hansa with the force of a baseball. Hansa raised one leg and stopped the car, then pushed it back with the force of the mystic-mechanical springs built into his lower body.

The Dead Apostle leapt over the vehicle, and ran up the side of the station building. The priest gave chase without hesitation, joining in the vertical dash. Based on the fact that he left deep wounds in the side of the building in his wake, he must have been using some device, but it was still a feat no ordinary person could have imitated.

When Hansa reached the rooftop, he received a submachine gun baptism.

Jester made the police special forces weapon, which he must have borrowed without anyone noticing, spit out a hail of bullets. At the same time, he let loose with a shotgun — also police equipment — in his left hand. A quantity of projectiles sufficient to make mincemeat of any ordinary man closed in on Hansa.

Just then, however, Hansa’s body seemed to sway like a heat haze. He evade most of the bullets without even using his Black Keys, and batted some of them out of the air with this own hand. The scene, straight out of an action movie, drew unaffected praise from Jester.

“Indeed, of all the executors I’ve seen, you are the top of the class!”

“Flattery won’t get me to go easy on you.”

“I merely stated fact. That strength of your... Could you be part of the ‘Burial Agency’ I’ve heard so much about?”

There is an organization, called the Burial Agency, made up of the very best of the executors. Its members have the power to do battle with the “Twenty-Seven Ancestors,” known as the pinnacle of vampire-kind. Their name was passed down among the Dead Apostles, who they would, it was said, occasionally slaughter solo, as a legend, a terror, and a warning.

Jester had brought up the Burial Agency to express respect for his opponent's strength. Hansa, however, wiped the complacent smile from his face, and scowled slightly as he spoke.

"The Burial Agency...? Me?"

The priest shook his head in apparent disgust, as if to say, "You don't know anything."

"You say some funny things, corpse. The likes of me doesn't hold a candle to them. I can't have you putting me on the same level."

"What?" Jester furrowed his brows.

"True, I can deal you lot the damage of a nuclear missile or a chemical weapon, but no man-made weapon could ever measure up to those exalted personages who walk the Lord's shadow! Each one of them administers cataclysm, executes the Lord's very works... They destroy evil that has trespassed in the Lord's domain with the Lord's own power. That is their domain as the pinnacle of the executors. Comparing them to the likes of me is nothing but an insult."

Hansa quietly steadied his breathing, and assumed what appeared to be a serious stance.

"You've only trespassed in man's domain. So I will destroy you... with human power!"



The stance appeared to be based on some form of martial art. The moment he laid eyes on it, Jester felt every cell in his body shudder.

*I see. So now he's serious.*

He was not certain that he would lose, but he knew it would be impossible for him to drive this man off unless he revealed every bit of his real power.

*It wouldn't be prudent to show my hand to the other mages and Heroic Spirits while the Grail War is still in its opening moves.*

You never knew where a familiar might be watching. Players who challenged open battle, relying on Noble Phantasms — like the police earlier — did not concern him. But if he was up against a truly powerful mage, revealing his own abilities was as good as telling them his weak points.

In addition, he had noticed something from the rooftop. In the east, the night sky was losing its color, and gradually beginning to lighten. In other words, it would not be long before morning came to that place.

“...I suppose it's time. I'll leave you with just a greeting for today.”

Jester turned, and leapt toward the hotel that stood next door. But...

“You're not going anywhere.”

With a loud mechanical noise, Hansa's right hand shot out at Jester. He was still gripping the Black Keys — which he'd rematerialized — so his outthrust arm was like a razor-sharp fork. It stretched out like a frog's tongue to seize the leaping Jester. At the last moment, however, the mechanical arm stopped just short of its target. Jester had instinctively twisted in mid-air and put himself on guard, but he wore a relieved grin. Until...

Crack. Another mechanical noise rang out, the wrist on the end of the outstretched arm opened, appearing to break, and something fired from the cavity inside.

“Wha—”

By the time Jester realized it was an explosive projectile, something like a grenade, it was already too late.

The holy water-infused warhead had penetrated his abdomen, and exploded.



## Chapter 5

### “The Shadown in the Park”



## **Chapter 5: Day 1, Dawn**

The Shadow in the Dark

The police station. Rear parking lot.

“...What’s that?”

Ayaka and Saber, who had escaped the police station through the back entrance, heard gunshots and looked up from the rear parking lot. They saw a man in the act of leaping from the edge of the roof to the building next door, and a priest stretching out his arm toward him. Then, with a fluid motion, the priest’s arm appeared to stretch to several times its length, only for a shell to fire from its mechanical-looking end, striking the man directly and causing a small explosion. Just like that, the man was blasted into a window of the adjacent hotel.

A little later, the priest — whose arm had returned to its original length — leapt toward the hotel with several swords in each hand.

The hotel might be next door, but there were still more than ten meters between it and then police station. Far enough that any normal human, even a running long jump world champion, would fall. The priest, however, leapt it easily, and vanished into the hotel.

“Am I dreaming...? Or were those ‘Heroic Spirits’?”

“Don’t you feel something when you look at me?” Saber asked anxiously.

“You’re hitting on me at a time like this? Give me a break...”

“No. You are indeed a charming woman, but that’s not what I meant. Don’t you get a sort of picture of my physical and magical strength when you look at me? It might pop into your head clearly written out, or...”

“I’m not really sure what you’re talking about...”

“I see...” Saber pondered, hearing Ayaka’s puzzled tone. “Perhaps because you really aren’t a proper Master...”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll take time to explain it properly later. It’s pointless if you can’t see it, anyway. Right now, the important thing is that you can’t distinguish between ordinary humans and Heroic Spirits. It won’t be a problem with ones whose appearances stand out, but a lot of Heroic Spirits look no different from ordinary humans when change into civilian clothes.”

When he got to that point, Saber checked his own attire, then looked at the paling sky in the distance, and muttered:

“I’d like to procure civilian clothes myself, but... Yes, it’s just dawn now. I shall leave these grounds, as I declared I would.”

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Inside the hotel.

The hotel next door to the police station had been ranked as the safest accommodation in the city, purely due to its location. That evaluation, however, was about to be overturned.

No sooner had sounds of gunfire and explosions resounded from the surrounding area without warning than a shockwave struck the building, causing damage in one of the guest rooms. It luckily happened to be unoccupied, but the damage to the hotel’s reputation was unavoidable.

While the hotel staff were running around, unable to get an objective grasp of the situation... the priest who had trespassed into the hotel through the damaged room was ultimately unable to locate Jester.

He had completely erased his presence, and even his magical energy had completely cut off. In its place were a number of injured people, who lay groaning on the hallway floor. They had probably been roused by the sounds of gunfire from the direction of the police station, and come out into the corridor. There were women and children among them, and some were bleeding from cut arms.

“Hey, are you alright?”

“Ngh... What...?”

The shocked victims appeared not to realize what had happened to them.

“Staunch your wounds with cloth. I’ll call an ambulance right away,” he said, but if the Dead Apostle had done something to them, he could not just allow them to be taken to a municipal hospital. Carelessness could lead to a massive outbreak of living corpses. If that happened, the Holy Grail War would be the least of his worries.

They don’t look like they’ve been cursed or had their blood sucked, but...

Then Hansa noticed a shivering child watching him from the shadow of the stairs.

“Hey, boy. You see anything?”

The pale-faced boy, not yet ten years old, nodded.

“A scary man... shouted, ‘Out of my way!’... Then he...”

“Do you know which way the scary man went?”

“...He disappeared.”

“...I see. I’m glad you’re alright. You’ll be safe now.”

*I see. He left them alive to slow me down.*

Hansa lightly patted the boy on his shaking head, then took out his cell phone.

“It’s me. One of you handle the suggestion on the crowd, and the other three surround the building. He might be mixed in with the evacuees, so be careful. Don’t overlook anyone suspicious.”

When he was done issuing orders, Hansa heaved a little sigh, and muttered:

“Good grief... A Dead Apostle after the Holy Grail; it really is the end of the world.”

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Main Street. Near the police station.

“Please stop.”

A woman stood in Ayaka and Saber’s way as they tried to leave the police station. She was a young brunette, but her features were hard to make out. That was because she wore an odd mask that covered her eyes. The center of the blindfold, which could have been cloth and could have been leather, was adorned with a cross. Her whole body was covered by something like a black wetsuit, and more odd decorations were visible in various places on the body-fitting fabric. A pure white cloth wrapped around her arm fluttered. Ayaka wondered if she was part of a circus.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve been told to investigate any suspicious people in this area.”

“You seem a lot more suspicious to me,” Ayaka said, knitting her brows. Then she noticed: There were large crowds of curious onlookers milling about, even on the rear side of the buildings, but none of their eyes paused on the suspiciously-dressed woman.

*Hub? Could it be that I’m the only one who can see her?*

A chill ran down her spine. Her mind flashed back to a little girl in a red hood. She was on the verge of panic.

“It’s an attention-deflecting barrier,” Saber explained in an attempt to reassure her. “Most likely the power of that cloth on her arm. She’s choosing to show herself to just us, so don’t worry, Ayaka. Still, this smell that’s been hanging over the area around the police station... It must be some sort of incense to facilitate mass hypnosis.”

“Mass hypnosis?”

“They probably want to conceal the fight between the monster and the priest we just saw. The Holy Church’s hunters don’t change, even after 800 years. Still, surely you can tell whether I’m a monster, or something else?”

The strangely-dressed woman heard Saber's words, and bowed respectfully.

"I take you to be Servant and Master. Excuse me."

"No need to apologize. Devotion to one's duty is a virtue," Saber said, and then caught sight of people beginning to evacuate the hotel one after another.

"Is the vampire... still in that hotel?"

"Yes. We have placed barriers over the entrances and exits; they will react if the Dead Apostle crosses them."

"Does that mean the vampire might leave?"

"Yes," the mysterious woman nodded matter-of-factly. Her words made Ayaka glance at Saber.

"I'd rather not get dragged into trouble, so... I'll be leaving."

"I suppose you're right. I'll accompany you."

"You really don't have to..."

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Ayaka put the area behind her at a brisk pace. She could hear a voice behind her saying, "If you find the time, please come to the central church. The overseer must have something to discuss with the Masters," but that had nothing to do with her.

"Unfortunately... I'm not a Master. Sorry."

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Behind the confused-looking woman, a stream of guests continued to evacuate the hotel. One child, mixed in among them, shot a glance in Ayaka and the others' direction. Including the woman from the Church, who ought to have been shielded by her attention-deflecting barrier.

The child whose head Hansa had patted shortly before saw the woman executor, and flashed a smile that was far from innocent. Then he thought to himself, conscious of the Command Seals that had moved to his back:

*Ugh. And here I'd thought to take a breather after tiring myself out.*

Once he had stood with the evacuees for a while, the boy quietly slipped out of line, and vanished into the dawn city. Neither passing through the executors's barriers, nor being showered in the rays of the rising sun posed any problem to him now. Because now Jester Karture's body was not that of a Dead Apostle; it was the body of an ordinary human boy.

And that boy murmured, with a smile of childish innocence that belied the twisted lust beneath stamped on his features:

"I wonder if Miss Assassin will come back soon!"

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The police station.

“Are you alright?”

The police station had become a battlefield. The Holy Church’s executors had administered their suggestion well, and it appeared that the incident would be settled as an attack by the friends of an arrested armed robber in an attempt to save him from prison. The lobby and parking lot, however, still bore fresh wounds, and the officers were covered in injuries.

That was the atmosphere that pervaded the station’s medical room, where the officer who had lost his right hand to the Dead Apostle was receiving treatment. He appeared to be undergoing a healing spell from a female officer whose with a large sickle Noble Phantasm, and the flow of blood from the wound was just stopping. Regenerating his lost hand, however, would require an exceedingly high level of healing magecraft. There was always the option of fitting him with an ordinary prosthetic hand, but he could not hope to return to the front lines any time soon in that condition.

“You have to understand. We’ll take it from here.”

“...No, I can do it. Please give me a chance.”

“With that wound? Next time we might be fighting the King of Heroes, or Saber, or Rider, who we don’t even have data on. Can you guarantee that you won’t get in the way in a harsher battle than the one against Assassin?”

“I...”

The officer ground his teeth in frustration.

He was the most positive about this operation, the chief thought.

One of the police officers with magic circuits — descendants of stray mages — whom he had gathered from across the country. At first the chief had thought of them as mere pawns, but when he had discovered those filled with zeal, like this man, he had revised his opinion somewhat.

That was precisely why he could not allow him to die needlessly. Because the chief needed someone to succeed him after he lost this war and died, for the sake of the next opportunity.

“You still have a future. Don’t throw it away for nothing.”

“But... I want to protect this city’s future.”

“What do you mean?”

“If we were only up against Heroic Spirits, I might have given up. But what will happen to the city if we leave vicious people like him to their own devices...? I can’t let it go, not as a mage, but as a police officer.”

The man was barely in his thirties. The chief sighed as he answered.



"I value your spirit, but I cannot put us all in danger in the blind belief that where there's a will, there's a way. If you say you can still fight, prove that you can handle your weapon with one hand, or with a prosthetic one."

"...I'll try."

The young officer's voice was full of fighting spirit. The chief was wondering whether he ought to address him at greater length, when the phone in his breast pocket rang, and forced a break in the conversation.

"...It's me."

"Hey there, bro! That sure was a disaster! A vampire! Imagine that. You sure you wouldn't have been better off summoning Frankenstein instead of yours truly, and getting him to whip you up a big batch of monsters?"

The chief sighed at Caster's usual demeanor, then replied coolly.

"If that was a joke, I'm not laughing. There were no actual fatalities, but we still have seriously injured people here."

"Come on, don't be that way. Ya can't have a war without somebody getting hurt. You realize you got real lucky not to lose anyone against that monster? I should be able to up the power on your equipment based on this experience."

"I'll be looking forward to it."

It was a heartfelt statement. Just as they themselves needed to gain more experience, it was also necessary to raise the limits of their Noble Phantasms. They weren't drawing out their full power yet, but one by one they would manage to release their true names and unleash their full potential. Most Noble Phantasms, such as Excalibur or Gae Bolg, were able to demonstrate their maximum power only when one intoned their true names. If all the officers managed to achieve that, then victory against the higher-ranking Heroic Spirits would finally be in sight.

"At the moment, the one closest to releasing its true name is... Why, bro, it's that Japanese sword of yours."

"I see. I'll get the rest caught up soon," the chief declared, at the same time telling himself that he could not afford to be overly optimistic.

"By the way, bro," Caster added, "the thing from that Shishigō guy came in."

"...Good. He works as fast as they say. Fast enough that I wish I could have brought him in as a Master on our side."

"Shishigō" was the name of a freelance mage known for his remarkable ability. The chief had paid him a large sum of money to acquire a certain object. He had estimated that there was a fifty-fifty chance of it arriving in time for the Grail War. The fact that it had come so soon could be called the silver lining on the dark cloud hanging over him.

As if to prove it, Caster reported his findings on the other end of the phone.

“If I work on this thing, I bet it’ll cut to the heart of most anything, Heroic Spirit or vampire.”

What he said next, however, defied the chief’s expectations.

“I’ll make it for the wounded lad lying next to ya, bro. To replace the dagger that got eaten up.”

“...If he proves that he can fight.”

“Yeah. I’ll be waiting, ya hear? In the meantime, I’ll be rehydrating dried goods from the age of the gods, and making the ultimate weapon.”

Caster spoke as if he was certain that the officer would recover. Then he spoke the thing’s name.

“With this hero-killin’ hydra venom dagger for a model, it’ll take no time at all. Ha ha!”

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Western Snowfield. The great forest.

Deep in the woods, several kilometers removed from the city... the woman Assassin crouched, repenting her own immaturity.

*How can this be...? What a fool I’ve been.*

She had barely questioned the fact that her magical energy was never exhausted. She had only been looking ahead. Her duty had been all she could see.

And this was the result. She had used the arts of the great chiefs with magical energy given her by a monster.

*I have defiled the chiefs’ great works. I am no longer qualified... to so much as call myself a believer...*

They were many reasons why she had not been chosen as the chief of the assassins, the “Old Man of the Mountain,” beginning with the fact that those around her had feared her fanaticism. One of those given, however, had been that she was simply too honest for an assassin.

In the affair at the police station, no ordinary assassin would have chosen a frontal assault. They might sometimes opt to carry out an assassination in a visible place in order to announce the power of their order to the masses, but the majority of the chiefs who took the name Old Man of the Mountain conducted themselves in manners truly befitting the name “assassin.” It was precisely because she was seen more as a warrior than as an assassin that the leaders of her time had feared her becoming chief. They had sensed a risk of the organization changing, and exposing their own vitals on the center stage of politics. The woman Assassin, who lacked

self-awareness, had continued to blame her own immaturity.

*Who did I imagine I was? Who am I to pass sentence on the heretical ritual that has led the chiefs astray? Was I not also drawn in by the Holy Grail? Yes, from the first, I have answered the grail's call. It is those who seek the Grail who are summoned to the Holy Grail War.*

*Yes, in truth I coveted the Grail. I desired to demonstrate my piety by seeking it out, and destroying it. I wanted to do it to make myself seem important... As a result, I wished for the Grail, and was seen through by the chaos of the Holy Grail War.*

Kneeling on the ground, she felt ashamed of her own weakness.

*Even a heretical ritual such as this was able to see through to my base interior.*

Her internal clock warned her that the time had come for prayer, but she considered that her present, defiled self did not have the right to offer them. Instead, she had decided to give herself over to meditation, and confront her own weakness.

How much time had passed since then? When she slowly rose to her feet, her eyes were filled with a dark, razor gleam.

*It's not over yet.*

Under normal circumstances, she might have given up the fight, her spirit broken. Or she might have compromised, saying, "What does it matter if it's a Dead Apostle's energy?" But she chose to do neither. Nor did she run. She reevaluated her position.

*Even my existence here is God's will. If this time is also part of the "life" allotted me, then... I must do my duty. Flight can never be permitted.*

*My duty... has not changed. It is to put an end to this heretical ritual, and... to hunt that monster.*

*My own immaturity is no reason to hesitate. I cannot make it an excuse.*

Whether she was acting to settle her own feelings, or for something else, she did not know. Assassin felt ashamed of her own weakness for wasting these minutes crouching here.

Oh, how immature I am.

There was no longer any hesitation in her eyes that noted the morning sun filtering through the trees. Having acknowledged her weakness, she had chosen the path of fighting once again.

*What should I use to slay that monster?*

An inhuman devil. It was true that she had once succeeded in crushing his heart with Delusional Heartbeat: Zabaniya. But it was also true that he still existed.

*How many hearts does he have? How can I erase all of him?*

Assassin reconsidered the powers she possessed. Imitations of the chiefs' techniques. But while they were the same in kind, they were not completely identical in strength. She herself

considered that all her techniques fell short of the chiefs', their actual effectiveness varied. Some had the same power as the techniques used by the actual Old Men of the Mountain, while others surpassed them, and still others were inferior.

For example, there was a skill called Delusional Poison Body: Zabaniya, which had once been wielded by an Old Man of the Mountain known as "The Tranquil." The power that "The Tranquil" herself had acquired had been truly fearsome. It had turned every part of her, including all her bodily fluids, her nails and skin, and even her breath, into deadly poison. A dreadful legend told how she had slaughtered an entire army by spreading her poison on the wind.

Assassin, however, merely mimicked that power temporarily by concentrated poison in her own blood. It was said that this was because she imagined a scenario in which indiscriminately scattering death on her surroundings might result in the deaths of comrades or innocents, and the concentration of the poison was consequently reduced.

Capricious Fleeting Shadow: Zabaniya was a technique for extending and controlling the hair on her head, but oral tradition had it that the Old Man of the Mountain who had actually used it had been capable of making each strand of their hair as fine as a spider's thread, and lopping off their target's head with no one being any the wiser.

On the other hand, unknown to Assassin, her Ichor of Reverie: Zabaniya, which manipulated her targets with song beyond the realm of human hearing, surpassed its original in power. Against a large group, as she had used it earlier, its effects ended at jolting her targets' brains and causing their magic circuits to go out of control, but if she concentrated her "song" on a single person, it was capable of bringing the average Servant to their knees, or completely dominating a human brain. The original had not been so powerful. Even if she had known that, however, she would not have accepted it. As far as she was concerned, the instant she had worked it out with her own power, it was an irreplaceable, divine work.

Assassin continued to list the countless techniques that reached the level of Noble Phantasms in her head, and to ponder which was best suited for eliminating the monster. In the midst of her ruminations, however, she felt a faint unease. It was a doubt she had sometimes harbored in life as well.

"Meditative Sensitivity: Zabaniya" — a technique allowed her to sense every feature of the surrounding terrain as part of her own body. It was the art she had employed to locate the police station's power source. Concerning that technique alone, she could not shake a strange feeling that something was not as it should be.

It was said that this venerable technique had been used by an Old Man of the Mountain, but in what era they had lived had not been definitely known. Not only to herself, but also to her

peers, her instructors, and even to the present Old Man of the Mountain. Only a tradition that an Old Man of the Mountain had used such an art remained. She had attempted to recreate the skill based on that, and yet...

*Was Meditative Sensitivity truly such an ability? Did a chief who wielded an art by that name even exist in the first place?*

Even she, who was called a fanatic, was forced to wonder. Or perhaps it was precisely because she had given everything to copy each and every one of those legendary techniques that she harbored such doubts.

I feel as though... something is being hidden from me. The truth behind the chief who used this Zabaniya...

At that point, she forced herself to stop wondering. She must not doubt. She was ashamed to have even considered such a thing; it was a sign that she was, indeed, immature.

Once more she sank into thought to overcome her enemy.

All the while, she felt that weird unease and a fateful premonition that “something might happen” groaning softly in the depths of her heart. Almost as though it was resonating with something.

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Coalsman Special Corrections Center.

A short time earlier.

“Now... It should be just about time.”

Shortly before the police station had come under assault from the woman Assassin, Faldeus had secluded himself in his workshop in the innermost depths of the prison facility. He stood in the center of the workshop, whose mystic accoutrements belied the modern penitentiary above, and slowly steadied his breathing. Various sorts of dolls, from delicate mannequins to ragdolls used in shamanism, were enshrined around him. All of their “eyes” were staring at a pedestal in the center.

Faldeus Dioland.

He came from a line of puppet-using mages, and was a relative of a mage who had once participated in the Fuyuki Holy Grail War. The third Holy Grail War, which had been conducted



before the second World War.

The tribulations of the mage, who had employed Assassin, had been inscribed as mystic “memories” in the puppets he had used, and transmitted through them to his family. Transmitted widely and unrestrictedly, not only to his heir, but even to distant relations. No member of the clan, however, stepped forward to declare that they would be the one to conquer the Holy Grail War.

The third Holy Grail War was said to have been thick with taboo spells and evil spirits of the land, broken rule after broken rule. It was only natural for any mage to think twice after viewing such a vivid record of it. Possibly, the more powerful members of the clan may even have noticed that something unwholesome had blended with the Grail. One of them — Faldeus’ grandfather — had joined hands with United States politicians and military leaders, and developed a plan.

A plan to hold a Grail War on their own land.

It had seemed impossible. After all, the construction of the Great Grail rooted in the earth, the foundation of the Holy Grail War, remained a closely-guarded secret of the Einzberns. Leaving that subject for later, however, they had secured a sacred ground to rival Fuyuki, and gone ahead with the underlying preparations.

The procurement of useable sacred ground had, in any case, likely been equally indispensable to the government. The Sacred Church was strong in the United States and suppressed any attempt to mix statecraft and magecraft. Such matters had ultimately fallen under the jurisdiction of a single agency.

They just needed to inch their way closer to the Fuyuki Holy Grail War in a century or two. Even if the national system called “America” were to change, they would continue to develop an organization on that basis. With that determination, they wrested the land from its guardians, and proceeded to tamper with its ley lines on a grand scale.

Less than a century later, however, around the time Faldeus’ father had inherited the enterprise, a major turning point arrived. A mage with connections to the dark side of the state, separate from Faldeus’ family, had proposed the possibility of recreating a part of the Great Grail system.

“I’ll steal a piece of the Fuyuki grail for you. All you have to do is cultivate it here.”

What nonsense.

Or so everyone thought, but the mage in question had shown the government results a number of times in the past, so they could not simply ignore it. But a fake was still a fake, even one cultured from the Great Grail. Its connection to the ley lines would be weak when compared to the complete entity that was the Fuyuki Grail. When Faldeus’ father asked if it was really possible to recreate the Grail by such means, the mage had replied:

“You just have to prime the pump.”

“Prime the pump, huh?” Faldeus muttered to himself with a wry smile, remembering the story his father had told him. “That ‘priming’ made a glass crater on the south side of town. Even irony has limits.”

He let out a big sigh, then wiped the smile from his face and began his mission.

“For elements, silver and iron. For foundation, stone and the Archduke of Contracts...”

The words that flowed from Faldeus’ mouth were unmistakably the incantation for summoning an Heroic Spirit. As the chant went on and on, the quality of the air began to change.

An impossible chant.

An impossible ritual.

Any mage who knew of the Grail War would have thought the same. After all, all of the Heroic Spirits had already been summoned. There were to be six Heroic Spirits in Snowfield. Faldeus himself had declared it to Rohngall and the Mages’ Association. And it had been no lie.

The fake Holy Grail War. The Heroic Spirits summoned as parts of a ritual that was both real and fake.

They were no more than sacrifices. Sacrifices to agitate the ley lines and intensify their waves in a fixed direction. Sacrifices to use the resulting backlash... to begin the real Holy Grail War.

“Emerge from the ring of restraint, O Guardian of the scales...!”

The instant Faldeus finished the chant, radiance filled his workshop. The eyes of the countless dolls enshrined around it reflected the light, and began to rattle, as though to bless the manifestation of the Heroic Spirit. Or as if frightened by the presence of death that filled the room.

Then, the light focused into a single point, and... nothing happened.

“...?”

As the light vanished, the dolls ceased their clatter. Chilly silence enveloped the workshop.

“...A failure...?”

He sensed neither the presence of a Heroic Spirit, nor a bond of magical energy. Most importantly, there was no voice asking him if he was its Master.

“Humph...”

But there was no irritation on Faldeus' face. If he were being honest, he had considered it a fifty-fifty chance. Using six Heroic Spirits as priming to summon seven more was too hard to swallow. After all, powerful Heroic Spirits like the King of Heroes had already materialized. It was too much for just "priming the pump."

"Well, I suppose that means we're going with plan B."

Faldeus heaved a little sigh, and put the workshop behind him.

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An area of the prison served Faldeus as both a second workshop and a monitor room. Upon entering it, he announced to Aldra and his other subordinates:

"We're switching to plan B. Contact Ms. Francesca and Mr. Reeve."

"...Did the Heroic Spirit fail to materialize?"

Faldeus answered Aldra's direct question with a quick nod.

"Yes. I suppose that, even with a time limit, seven at once really is the limit. Execute the fake Grail War according to plan, counting Saber as the seventh fake Servant rather than the first real one."

*I'm not sure if the Grail will manifest or not, given the circumstances... but I suppose that will be a problem for next time.*

*Still, the Command Seals, at least, did appear... I wonder if it's possible to do away with one of the current Masters and use these to form a new contract with their Heroic Spirit.*

Coldly eyeing the Command Seals on his right hand, Faldeus jotted down his progress on a notepad. That done, he was about to get in contact with all the parties concerned, when he noticed something just a little out of place.

Noise was flickering across several of his orderly rows of monitors. If that had been all, he would have assumed it a simple breakdown. The problem was that the noise extended to feeds coming from familiars. They might be monitor-shaped, but they were mystical.

Ordinary noise was impossible, so Faldeus suspected interference from an outside mage. Then, when he was in the middle of a monitor check... he noticed that he was scribbling on the notepad by his hand.

*Whoops. It's not like me to do something like that... Maybe failing to summon a Heroic Spirit did give me a bit of a shock.*

Having finished puzzling over his own actions, Faldeus was about to tear out the sheet when, suddenly, his hand stopped. Amid his scribbles, clearly meaningful words were written in a hand entirely unlike his own.

“I ask thee: art thou my Master?”





Faldeus felt the blood drain from his head all at once. He slowly ran his gaze over his surroundings, determined not to let impatience get the better of him. Then he saw the darkness.

The noise was on a monitor displaying the outside of the prison. There was a blind spot under the trees where the light did not reach. Faldeus' eyes were drawn to that still deeper darkness. To be precise, they were drawn to a small, white object floating in its center.

The monitor was a mystic implement linked to a familiar. Faldeus sent a command to the familiar, and made it move closer to the shadows. Before long, Faldeus was certain: the thing floating in the darkness was a twisted skull mask.

"...Excuse me; I'm going out for a breath of fresh air."

As soon as Faldeus was out of the room, he made for the place he'd seen in the monitor at a brisk pace. It was still conceivably a trap laid by an outside mage. He proceeded cautiously down the hallways of the prison, keeping a wary eye on his surroundings.

The hallways were long, and it was not yet dawn. As he hurried past windows that let in almost no light... the fluorescent light at the end of the corridor dimmed, and then went out. The way ahead was suddenly plunged in blackness. And in that blackness, Faldeus saw it: a white skull mask suspended in deep darkness.

There's no mistaking it. That skull mask belongs to... an Assassin-class Heroic Spirit.

Had his summoning succeeded? Or could it be the Assassin that had already been summoned as a "sacrifice"? Guesses were still whizzing through Faldeus' brain when the fluorescent light turned back on, and, at the same time, the white mask vanished.

"Was that..." He started to mutter, when the light directly above him went out. As it did, a voice called out to him from behind.

"...Don't turn around."

Faldeus could just tell that the voice was male. It was so coldly inhuman, however, that he could not imagine the speaker's age, build, or anything else except that he had whispered from behind Faldeus' back.

"...!"

In that instant, Faldeus was prepared for his own death. Nothing he did now would do him any good. Even if he used all the magecraft he possessed, it would be impossible to extricate himself from this situation. The "death" he sensed was that certain.

Faldeus did not know what was behind him. It almost seemed to him that limitless blackness gaped open there. He sensed nothing. The voice had not even been full of bloodlust; almost the

opposite...

He had not been able to pick up anything in the voice at his back. It felt like the airless void itself had called out to him. Its presence had been so rarefied that he almost wondered if his own ears had been playing tricks on him.

Even so, there was one thing he could picture: that if there was something behind him, it must be the white mask he had just seen floating in the darkness.

“I ask thee... Art thou my Master?”

A question from nothingness. Faldeus knew that there must be an answer there if he turned to look, but he could not bring himself to do it. All he could do, in the stillness, was to address the man standing behind him.

“...Yes. If you appeared in answer to my summoning earlier, then I suppose I am.”

After a brief pause, a whisper shook Faldeus’ eardrums.

“...Have you faith?”

“Faith...?” Faldeus was doubtful.

“...Have you a belief to which you would devote your life?” The voice shot back at him dispassionately.

Faldeus considered a moment, then steadied his breathing and answered.

“I would give all magecraft for our United States. That is my faith.”

“...Have you the resolve to see that faith through, even if it means ending another’s life?”

“Am I willing to kill for it, you mean?”

“...That is what it would mean to contract with me.”

Most mages were prepared to take lives in the Holy Grail War. Even so, how many would be able to give an immediate answer while they could clearly sense their own death approaching? After a brief silence, the young mage opened his mouth to speak with a surprisingly calm mind.

“Of course I am. If it was for the United States, I would not even hesitate to kill a fellow citizen.”

A short period of silence followed Faldeus’ declaration, then the darkness behind him replied:

“...My name is Hassan-i Sabbah.”

The Heroic Spirit had declared his own true name. The contract had not yet been sealed, so it had not been telepathy, but Faldeus was certain that the introduction had reached no ears but

his own. The whisper had actually stirred only a single point in Faldeus' brain. It had felt almost like a curse seeping into his guts.

"So long as you retain your faith, I shall be your shadow."

Then, without ever showing itself, the "shadow" left a parting word, and vanished into the darkness. Only the still-immobile Faldeus was left. He had a feeling that a line of magical energy connected him to a distant "something." He could not, however, feel much movement of magical energy. He could not immediately determine if they were even linked.

"I see... It may be too late, but it feels real now."

If he had gotten a single answer wrong, he would probably have died. If he mistook a single button press, even the Heroic Spirit he had summoned could become his grim reaper. He felt the reality of how irrational, and how terrible, a Heroic Spirit could be.

Faldeus gave a little chuckle, although he was oozing cold sweat.

"So this... is the Holy Grail War."

## Chapter 6

“Two Archers and...”

## **Chapter 6: Day 1, Noon**

Two Archers, and...

In a dream.

“Yay! A doggie!”

An innocent cry resounded in the sunlit garden.

“There’s a kitty, too! And a squirrel!”

She chased after the animals scurrying back and forth across the garden lawn, catching one of them and hugging it to her.

“You brought them all, didn’t you, Mr. Black? Thank you!”

The girl looked up to where an enormous black shadow — Rider — wriggled. Tsubaki called the Servant “Mr. Black”; it did not appear to frighten her.

Countless birds flocked through the sky overhead, and small animals ran energetically around her. The garden had the air of a miniature petting zoo, and Tsubaki was happy in it.

“Tsubaki, it’s almost time for lunch.”

“Remember to wash your hands.”

“I will!”

At a word from her parents, Tsubaki went into the house. She turned around once to take another look at the sun-drenched garden.

Birds singing. Cats and dogs basking in the sun on the lawn. Squirrels munching on nuts with its children. It was the picture of her ideal garden. Only the great black shadow swaying in its center was out of place. Tsubaki, who seemed not to notice its strangeness, beamed with satisfaction.

Unaware of what was taking place in the world to pay for her modest garden.

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A cheap motel.

“Next, the news. Veterinary hospitals throughout Snowfield are in a state of panic. Since early this morning, animals across the city have been entering comatose states, and worry that this could be a new form of communicable disease is spreading among residents. All the affected animals soon regained consciousness, but based on the fact that reddish-brown spots have



appeared on their skin, an investigation in cooperation with the Municipal Board of Health is...”

“Hooray! The formalities are finally over with. I’ve done it, Jack!”

In spite of the news running on the local cable station, a carefree voice filled the cheap motel room.

“Indeed. Celebrating is all very well, but at present I question the wisdom of shouting my true name at the top of your lungs.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right! Sorry about that! In that case, let’s think up a nickname for you! Something like, umm... The English Hell-Slasher, or...”

“Just call me Berserker,” the Berserker watch pointed its hands at the excitable Flat.

Flat’s high spirits had to do with the cell phone in his hands. It was the latest model, capable of sending emails with photos attached and making international calls. He was delighted that, with it, he would be able to make contact with his master in the Clock Tower.

“I’m finally connected to all sorts of things. I went out of my way to buy the actual phone yesterday, but I was only able to use it as a camera and radio.”

Flat was staring at the screen, viewing a variety of photographs. They included, for example, one of the exploded opera house.

“I wish I’d gotten a shot of that Heroic Spirit’s performance yesterday. I was so excited about getting interviewed myself that I ended up missing my chance...”

“Well, I suppose taking a photograph is one way of obtaining intelligence on enemy Heroic Spirits...”

Jack was trying to take a positive view of the situation.

“Oh, but I did get a picture of the Dead Apostle, and of one other Heroic Spirit!” Flat responded, eyes shining. He pointed the screen at the watch. It displayed an image of the Dead Apostle who had gone on a rampage through the police station parking lot the day before. “This is valuable! All the other people who took pictures deleted them because of the Church ladies’ hypnosis! Oh, I’m so glad I trained to avoid hypnotic suggestion!”

“Wait a moment. The vampire concerns me, but more importantly, tell me all about this ‘one other Heroic Spirit.’”

“Oh, that’s right. Your eyes were glued to the battle between that priest and the Dead Apostle, Jack, so you wouldn’t have noticed him.”

“Why did you not say something to me at the time!?”

“Well, it was only for a moment, so I figured it could wait,” Flat answered lightly.

Berserker thought that it was about time he gave his Master a good talking-to, and was about to enter into a telepathic harangue. Before he could begin, however, Flat’s next words poured

cold water on his temper.

“Besides... if we’d slipped up and made a fuss, and he’d noticed us, I’m pretty sure we would have been killed instantly.”

“...What?”

“I’ve never seen such an incredible mass of energy before. It’s not even a question of what abilities he has, or what his true name is... I think we’d probably be dead the moment he laid eyes on us.”

Flat’s expression was the same as ever, but Berserker intuitively understood the truth of the boy’s words. They had had a brush with death, and Flat, far from blurting it out immediately, had actually forgotten to tell him until just then. That fact made Berserker uneasy, but at the same time it gave him an odd sense of security.

“...Really, you are the limit... I’d taken you for a mere fool, but now I see you can be dry about the strangest things.”

“You thought I was a fool this whole time?”

“I take it you’re upset?”

“No. In fact, I’m kind of glad.” Grinning cheerfully, Flat thought back on the Clock Tower, which was almost a second home to him. “People have always been weirdly afraid of me or avoided me, ever since I was a little kid... The only ones who ever call me things like ‘fool’ or ‘idiot’ to my face are the professor, and his sister, the princess, and everyone else in our department, and the OBs...”

Flat’s tone was solemn. Berserker almost sympathized with him for a moment, then thought better of it.

“Wouldn’t that be... well... quite a lot for most people?”

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Several minutes later. London. The Clock Tower.

While Snowfield was greeting the dawn, morning was still a long way from London. In a room of the Clock Tower — the nucleus of magecraft — two of its executives had come face to face for a consultation on the Holy Grail War in Snowfield.

“I knew he was a fool... and an idiot...” Lord El-Melloi II muttered, grimacing. The man sit-

ting with him — Rocco Belfaban — let out a sigh before answering.

“I concur, Mr. II.”

The pair were looking at images relayed by mages who had been sent to infiltrate the Snowfield site. A pool of mercury used in mystical communication was currently displaying a recording of Snowfield’s local news broadcast.

“Huh? Am I on TV? Oh wow, I wonder if the professor or Reines are watching!”

No sooner did El-Melloi see an excited Flat face the camera and say those words than he experienced the vivid sensation that his stomach was dancing a jig while playing the violin badly. Rocco, seeing the deep furrows on El-Melloi’s brow, addressed him half-pityingly.

“I bear some of the responsibility for forcing him on you in the first place, but, to be honest, you’ve kept him on so long I’ve gone past admiration for you and into exasperation.” The old mage made his chair creak as he continued. “Both master and disciple entering the Grail War behind their professor’s back... You might as well just say that recklessness is part of your curriculum.”

“I can’t deny it.”

“Still, while Flat is a problem child, he’s also an unmitigated genius. If by some chance he manages to bring the Great Grail system back to the Clock Tower, nothing could be better. And if he manages to bring back an actual Heroic Spirit as a research subject, it could rewrite the books.”

The old man was, in short, suggesting that they might come away with only the tastiest morsels. El-Melloi II gave a slight shrug.

“I see. Words worthy of the head of the Department of Summoning and Lord of the School of Spiritualism. Then again, Director Eulyphis might come right out and say ‘asset’ instead of ‘research subject.’”

“Leave off the sarcasm. You know better than anyone that being an acting Lord doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yes, I agree. I’m merely keeping the seat warm. Which do you think will happen first — our princess reaching maturity, or the stately procession making its way through Fuyuki and other special spiritual lands coming back?”

“I told you to leave off the sarcasm.”

Rocco was a rigid conservative, even by Clock Tower standards. By all rights he ought to look down his nose at a “temporary Lord who refuses to side with the conservatives or the reformists” like El-Melloi the II, but at present they were talking like virtual equals. That was because his own position was a little like El-Melloi II’s.

The proper Lord of the School of Spiritualism — it’s director, the present head of the Eu-

lyphis family — and his successor, Bram Nuada-Re Sophia-Ri, were temporarily absent from the Clock Tower due to a special assignment. And until they returned from their lengthy mission, Rocco had been appointed to fill the position of Lord as their representative. He craved power, but also realized that he was unsuited to the office of Lord, and so ended up feeling ashamed of himself at conferences. So ashamed that he could feel his life shorten every time another Lord, especially Lord Barthomeloi, glared in his direction. Thanks to that, he had apparently developed a sympathetic side for Lord El-Melloi II, who must feel even more ashamed than he did.

“Still... that man in armor who turned up later on is a bigger problem than Flat. If he was a Heroic Spirit, I suppose we should take it to mean that the Americans lack the power to keep the Grail War entirely secret.”

“I can only imagine that he exceeded their expectations, but...”

El-Melloi II wanted to declare categorically that an Heroic Spirit who would voluntarily appear on television was unprecedented, but the image of a certain broadminded Heroic Spirit who would probably have given his own true name on the air if given the chance kept popping into his head.

“...Well, you can never tell what might happen in a Grail War,” he muttered to avoid the issue, then launched into his views on secrecy. “The secrecy maintained by the Holy Church and ourselves won’t last more than another five years. After that we’ll enter the era when anyone can upload high definition images to social networks in real time. Once that happens, the ability of information to spread will outstrip the pressure to conceal it. We are approaching a crossroads where we will have to choose to either explore new methods of secrecy, or to reveal something.”

“Humph... I’m sorry, I haven’t been keeping up with the times; what field of magecraft uses the term ‘social network’?”

“...”

El-Melloi II remembered that the old man in front of him was a staunch conservative mage who balked at ordinary telephones, let alone cellular ones, and wondered where to begin. Then the cell phone in his own pocket sounded to tell him he had mail.

“Excuse me.”

He did not recognize the address, but the title “To Mr. Absolute Territory Magician!” was enough to tell El-Melloi II who had sent it. He struggled desperately to maintain his cool while mentally shouting, “Fuck.”

“My stupid fool of a pupil has finally made contact.”

“Oh-ho. How fortuitous.”

El-Melloi II next scanned the mail’s contents.

“Hi, Professor! This will be my phone mail debut! Thanks to your help, I was able to summon the best Heroic Spirit! Look at my Berserker!”

A photo of a steampunk-style watch was attached.

“I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about...”

El-Melloi II wondered if it was not his student who had gotten the Mad Enhancement skill, but then thought that Flat had probably had it already, and kept his cool. A few seconds later, another mail from Flat arrived.

“I’ve discovered my first Heroic Spirit in town! Actually, if you include Berserker and the man in armor, I guess he’s my third. He seemed scary, so of course I couldn’t just say hello. I wonder what I could do to make friends with him.”

“Honestly, that idiot...”

He opened the attached photo, experiencing the vivid sensation that his own stomach had begun head banging to death metal. Then he saw the flashy man riding in the back of the Cadillac in the picture, and his stomach’s wailing suddenly stopped. And not just his stomach — his breathing, blinking, and even his heart might have stopped for a few seconds.

“Impossible...”

“What is it, Mr. II?”

Rocco sounded concerned, but in El-Melloi II’s head, the pieces were falling into place. He had gotten word of the crater formed in the desert. Besides, while the man’s clothes and hair were different from those he remembered, he could never fail to recognize the unbelievably powerful Servant he had once seen in Fuyuki. If that Heroic Spirit was involved, then a crater or two were to be expected.

Rocco stared at El-Melloi II’s pale face, worried that anxiety might cause him to collapse again, when time abruptly resumed, and El-Melloi II sprang to his feet, overflowing with energy.

“...Excuse me. Do you mind if I email for a moment?”

“Oh... No,” Rocco nodded, overawed. Email? He wondered, seeing the grave look on El-Melloi II’s face, Is he going to write a letter here? Where’s his pen? He was apparently under the impression that the earlier communication had arrived via mystical telepathy, or something of the kind.

Behind the old mage’s back, El-Melloi II was entering text into his cell phone at an incredible speed.



“As your professor, I’m giving you an assignment: no matter what happens, stay away from that Heroic Spirit.”

After thinking for a moment, he made one addition.

“Hurry up and mail me your cell phone number, you \*\*\*\*\*.”

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The same time. Snowfield. The top floor of Crystal Hill. The royal suite.

Gilgamesh, unaware that his photograph had caused a mage’s heart to stop for several seconds, was looking down on the city through the full glass siding of his superlatively opulent room.

“Ha ha ha! As I thought; even in the simple arrangement of its roads and buildings, the city of Uruk is more beautiful!” He laughed good-humoredly, comparing it to the city he had once ruled.

Once they had gotten back to Tine’s workshop in the Cadillac, he had had Tine gather only the bare necessities, and taken her to the top floor of the casino hotel. The funds, naturally, had come from his casino winnings of the day before. Because he used the fortune he had won in their casino at their hotel, the management regarded him as their finest customer.

In addition to Tine, a number of her black-clad subordinates came to stay as bodyguards. One conspicuous man, and a crowd who respectfully followed him. To the hotel staff, they must have looked like some billionaire and his servants. Possibly they took Tine, due to her age, as a servant’s daughter or the rich man’s ward.

Tine did not understand Gilgamesh’s intentions. He was a king, so probably he wanted to base himself in the most luxurious rooms in the city. To her, however, moving to such a conspicuous place was merely unnerving. It would probably be watched by the enemy mages who had built the city, and, as it was not even a workshop, it would be difficult to make ready against attack. And even if they did make it into a workshop, that would hardly be enough to assuage her anxiety.

“I hear that there was a case in a previous Grail War in which a Master crushed a workshop by bringing down the entire hotel it was in. Our enemies’ organization is vast, so they may attempt to destroy us, Crystal Hill and all,” she had counseled.

“Let them do as they please,” Gilgamesh had replied easily. “Ordinarily I would tell you to overcome such trifles yourself, but I suppose I am the one who summoned you to this place. I shall at least lend you a parachute.”

It was impossible to tell whether Gilgamesh was serious or joking. He continued to stare down at the city with a graceful bearing. Before long he moved to the west wall of the room.

“It seems my friend is in quite a festive mood as well,” he chuckled, looking out at the great forest that extended as far as the eye could see. “I mean, making such a vast wood dance...”

Tine, hearing those words, looked toward the forest as well. As one of the Protectors of the Land, she soon realized what was happening. The whole forest was shifting and rustling as if it was a single creature.

“Your friend?”

“Yes. I shall tell you about him sometime, if the mood takes me. Still, our reunion banquet was quite replete. If only we had not been interrupted, we would have gone on for three days and three nights.”

That tremendous battle... for three whole days...

Gilgamesh's words made Tine feel faint, and nervous sweat run down her back. It was no joke; if the King of Heroes said so, then he really could fight for three days and three nights. If there was any reason he could not, it would be because she was his Master.

As a mage, and heir to ancestral power, she had thought she was strong. But what she could do in the face of powerful Heroic Spirits? Tine continued to wonder, but she was determined to use everything she had.

“...At present, our allies are tracking the movements of other mages. The head of the Kuruoka family, who appears to be one of the architects of the city's system, is behaving as if he has nothing to do with the Grail War, but...”

“Why report that to me? As Master, you decide how to act.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

Gilgamesh glanced at the despondent tine, flashed a wicked grin, and asked:

“So, Tine, you want to take back this land, do you not?”

“...! Of course I do!”

“In that case, wouldn't you agree that that making a wasteland of this banal scenery, along with those mongrel mages, would be the fastest way to do it?”

“What...?”

It did not seem like just a joke. Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, could easily achieve what he had said. The battle in the desert a day ago had taught her that he had the power.

“Your Majesty jests...”

"I jest? Is it not the solution closest to the your ancestors' 'dearest wish'? What difference is there between the life of the clown who first summoned me and those of the mongrels who crawl through this city? Would it not be simplest to use those Command Seals of yours and order me to erase the city? I could even wait for your compatriots to evacuate."

"..."

Tine considered a while, then timidly answered:

"If I were to commit such an atrocity... I would be the same as the mages who stole this land."

"Lacking. That's an answer you found, not one that you thought of yourself."

"...!"

Tine was deeply ashamed to be seen through so easily. Even she knew that that was the wrong answer.

*I swore to become even greedier than the mages, and steal back the land. So why do I hesitate to destroy this city? Why? Why? Why?*

Tine hung her head in shock, failing to fathom even her own heart. She could not answer the king's question. She had no choice but to face his judgment. The girl's heart began to fill with a fear she thought she had cast aside. She had been prepared for death from beginning. Now, however, she was more frightened of disappointing this Heroic Spirit.

Gilgamesh saw the state Tine was in, saw through what she was thinking, and laughed as he continued.

"So, you've begun to doubt. I approve."

"What...?"

"Doubt is a foundation for demolishing blind faith. What are you looking so gloomy for? I was merely teasing you a little. Let it pass."

There had obviously been nothing "teasing" about his import, but for the moment Tine felt relieved. Her self-doubt, however, did not disappear. It clung to her heart.

"Still... even setting your wish aside, when you look at human garbage, do you not find yourself wanting to blow it all away?" Gilgamesh vented, sounding bored as he looked down on the city once more.

"...?"

"Honestly... I toured the city in person yesterday, and most of this era's mongrels are utterly worthless. Mongrels ought to flourish in my garden, but merely growing in number is ugly."

"What... do you intend to do about it?"

Tine was nervous that the King of Heroes might suddenly decide to "remove" the townspeople from his sight. As if to assuage such worries, however, Gilgamesh shrugged.

“Do not concern yourself. I would hardly go out of my way to clean up refuse.” Gilgamesh sounded bored as he surveyed the city. “Although if I were to incarnate and truly savor life’s pleasures, it would be another story. When that time comes I may consider culling the mongrels unworthy of life, but that has nothing to do with me now. If the mongrels choose a slow ruin, I shall simply watch their foolish end with a laugh.”

Then he went on, waxing nostalgic for the distant past and seeming to speak half to himself.

“If my garden was to be spoiled by rampaging monsters, I could not ignore it, but if it is the road the mongrels choose for themselves, I shall not object. Although if they fail to notice that a choice remains, I may at least grant them hardships as guideposts.”

Hearing those words, Tine felt both relieved and awed. This King of Heroes was indeed a king who would treat the whole Earth as his garden. A king among kings, equipped with an unshakable “self,” who would pass sentence on the human race.

Tine sensed something that was not divine justice. She continued to stare fixedly at Gilgamesh, hoping to identify it.

“What is it? Have you finally noticed that the greatest pleasure in this world is to look on my glory? Very well, I permit you. Stare at me to your heart’s content, and pass on the tale to your offspring until the stars perish.”

Tine thought that he must be joking this time, but she could not shake the feeling that he was serious.

*I don’t really understand, but he really is an incredible person...*

Tine — who, although mature for her age, was still fundamentally a child — appeared to accept Gilgamesh’s eccentric speech and conduct, and — judged by ordinary standards — extreme aspect, as “just how kings are.” In a sense, you could say that they were highly compatible.

Then the King of Heroes opened his mouth to deliver another indifferent, capricious proclamation.

“Now, today... I suppose we ought to begin by removing the flying vermin.”

“Flying vermin?”

“Yes. It seems that there is a boorish fellow who got in the way of my and my friend’s joyous reunion. Yesterday I made a circuit of the city in search of the scoundrel, but I did not find them. Therefore, there is nothing to do but sit and wait for them to come to me.”

“Wait...? You mean here?”

“Naturally,” the King of Heroes answered the bewildered Tine in a voice brimming with confidence. “One of the most formidable opponents of the Holy Grail War taking up a position as conspicuous as this one will not go unnoticed. Of course, my friend — another dangerous foe — is making a racket in the forest... but whichever way the vermin are drawn, there will be

fewer of them.”

I wasn’t clear what basis Gilgamesh had for his declaration, but in any case he made it confidently.

“Insects cannot resist dazzling lights. Once I’ve enticed them in, I shall incinerate them without a trace.”

Then, the next instant... a biting wind blew through the city of Snowfield.

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The police station. The chief’s office.

“Yoohoo. Doing well, newbie?”

Francesca’s voice was brimming with youthful energy.

“Go home, you old bitch.”

The chief practically spit his reply.

“Oh? What’s this? I knew you were calling me that behind my back, but you just might hurt my feelings, saying it to my face. I enjoy physical wounds more than mental ones, so I wish you’d think before you speak.”

“Shut up.”

The chief was plainly hostile to the gothic lolita girl, but she did not show the least sign of leaving.

“Yes, yes, I’ll be quiet. Let me say just one thing, though: you keep going ‘old, old,’ but you know, it’s only been three years since I started using this body. Even its organs are pretty. Want a look?”

So saying, Francesca quickly rolled up part of her dress, exposing her bellybutton. And something bizarre along with it.

It was a shapely belly at first glance, but there was something on it that did not belong: a wide zipper, installed directly into the flesh. It was made of a material like human teeth, and extended from near her rib cage on both sides, joining above her bellybutton. One did not like to imagine what one could see if one were to open it.

“Well? Do you want a look? You do, don’t you? A good look at a girl’s *s e c r e t o r g a n s*?” Francesca giggled seductively. The chief, however, did not turn a hair.

“What do you want? Come to laugh at me when I’m down?”



“Of course not! I came to check up on you! Talk about a disaster. I mean, a Dead Apostle being a Master? Not even I could have foreseen that! We’ve got to eliminate them quickly!”

“Liar. Anyone could tell that you’re secretly overjoyed things have gotten interesting.”

“Oh, is it that obvious? But you know, I do loathe Dead Apostles. They are enemies of the whole human race, after all. I’m on humanity’s side, so I’ll never let the likes of them have it.”

Francesca self-confidently threw out her chest.

“You’re just struggling for prey,” the chief spat again.

“What’s this? Are you pouting? Was that handsome priest stealing your spotlight come as that much of a shock?”

“More importantly, how do we treat the Holy Church?”

“You can ignore them for now. Any Master that wants to go running to them at the last minute will do it on their own anyway.”

Francesca twirled her umbrella, then suddenly puffed out her cheeks.

“Either way, there were parts of what happened last night that weren’t even fun for me.”

“Which ones?”

“I mean, It was an executor and a Dead Apostle who got to stand out in the end! That’s not right! Outsiders like them aren’t supposed to have such big roles in the opening moves!”

Francesca shook her umbrella and her fist as she spoke. Then she suddenly stopped moving, spread her arms wide, and declared to no one in particular:

“Servants and their Masters are still the stars of the Holy Grail War!”

“...”

“...Don’t you agree?”

Just as she turned to the chief with a broad grin... the area around them was enveloped in the roar of an explosion, and every pane of glass in the chief’s office windows shattered.

“!?”

And it was not just the office. A thunderous roar and a blast of wind shook every window on the north side of the police station to pieces.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Now it’s starting! Have you bought a pamphlet? Got your popcorn? Oh, but I guess it would be donuts for you, chief. Hurry up, or you’ll miss out on the match of the century!”

“You bitch...!”

The chief glared at Francesca. He was still unaware that the police station was not the only building with broken glass...

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Several dozen seconds earlier. North Snowfield. A large ravine.

A red clay ravine several kilometers further north of from the cave where Gilgamesh had been summoned.

The man stood on a rise that reached almost the same elevation as the top floor of Crystal Hill. A lean, wiry man, just over two meters tall. His hands clutched a bow. It was larger than an ordinary longbow, but it seemed a little undersized in the tall man's hands.

The man's dress went beyond "eccentric" to become what could only be called "bizarre." The first thing that caught one's eye was a long, decorated cloth draped vertically over his body. And not draped over his shoulders, either; the cloth was centered on the top of his head, and, having completely covered his face and the back of his head, went on to hang down so that it concealed both the front and back of his body. The only parts of his head that peaked out from under the cloth were his ears. On his upper body, however, he wore nothing else. A dark dye stained every inch of his exposed skin. It was also marked with some sort of design in a white dye, but it was hidden by the aforementioned cloth, and it was impossible to get a full view of it.



The man — who looked at first glance like he was about to appear in a horror game and chase its protagonist around — smirked under the cloth that covered his face, and silently drew his bow taught.

Then his fingers released the bowstring, and loosed an arrow. An arrow that flew far faster than the wind, and outstripped even the speed of sound.

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High above Snowfield.

A wind like a blade carved a straight line through the city of Snowfield. It split the air, throwing off shockwaves. By the time a roar like thunder filled the area, the wind had already passed.

At the wind's center was a single arrow. It was headed toward the top floor of a skyscraper in the heart of Snowfield — Crystal Hill.

The arrow shot by the mystery man plunged ahead like a laser, defying the laws of physics by never slowing or losing altitude. It had already traveled more than 20 kilometers. That alone was enough to prove that the archer was no human, and no ordinary mage.

Shockwaves raced through the sky over the city. The impact and noise together shattered the glass of every building below the arrow's trajectory one after another.

No human — no, not even a Heroic Spirit — could survive a direct hit from such a missile unscathed. The strike would reduce their entire upper body to mincemeat before it even pierced their skull.

The arrow was charging straight toward its target: Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, who had taken up his position on the highest floor of Crystal Hill.

Or rather, the head of the girl standing beside him — his Master.

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Crystal Hill. The royal suite.

Tine, who had been facing Gilgamesh, suddenly turned to look out the north window.

“What...?”

The sound had not reached her yet. She had merely sensed a disturbance in the mana filling

the sky, and turned to face it for no reason in particular. By the time she sensed the wind being ripped to shreds, it was already too late. A tiny point of death was closing in on the girl, too close for her to react in time. No matter what she tried to do now, there was no way of avoiding the supersonic arrow.

At least, not for her.

“...”

An instant later, when the arrow had come within 20 meters of the hotel, thunder sounded outside the glass. There was a dazzling flash, and countless tiny bolts of lightning streaked through the sky. One of them appeared to strike the arrow, and what should have been a killing blow disintegrated in the air just short of its target. The shockwaves, however, still shattered the glass, and assailed everyone in the room.

“ ”

A wordless incantation. A wind sprung from Tine’s hand, and became a protective wall, knocking the shower of falling glass away from her, Gilgamesh, and her black-suited followers.

“Are you unharmed, my lord?” She called out to Gilgamesh as soon as she had steadied her breathing.

“It is nothing.”

The King of Heroes was uninjured, but sounded displeased.

“What was that lightning...?”

“The very thunderbolts are my Noble Phantasms. It appears they have intercepted some attack,” Gilgamesh replied offhandedly.

“An attack?” Tine could not keep from blurting out.

When she looked out the window, she saw that there were a number of discs floating around the top of the building. The Noble Phantasms continued to make their rounds, clad in miniature lightning, inscribing beautiful geometric designs against the vista.

“Auto Defensors. There was a chance that my friend might jestingly launch a surprise attack. I set them up as a precaution, but...”

Gilgamesh looked to the north, and pulled a Noble Phantasm from his “treasury” — a weirdly curved lens set in a golden ring that floated in the air. Despite having only a single lens, it displayed distant scenery like a telescope.

“I never imagined it would serve to repel the arrows of a mere archer.”

The image that appeared in the ring was that of a man, facing them and fearlessly readying

his bow.

“An archer...?”

A doubt passed through Tine’s brain. Archer was none other than Gilgamesh, who was standing beside her. Could this man be a Rider, Assassin, Berserker, or some other class who happened to wield a bow, then? When first caught sight of the archer through the golden ring, she had immediately been surprised by how high his statuses were. In terms of pure statistical values, he could even be said to surpass Gilgamesh.

Berserker, then...?

Tine was wary. Gilgamesh, however, remained expressionless.

“...Are you coming?” He muttered.

But the second shot had already been fired.

The Auto Defensors’ lightning activated to intercept the arrow, but although several bolts struck home, it slipped through the gaps in the bolts to fly straight at Gilgamesh. The speed at which electricity travels through air — that is, the speed of lightning — while slower than light, still should to have been more than sufficient to catch any ordinary arrow. The speed of that arrow, however, was beyond human limitations.

Gilgamesh immediately materialized his armor, and swept the arrow aside with his left gauntlet. It seemed that it could not completely kill the shot’s momentum, however, because a portion of the armor cracked, and fragments of gold showered the floor.

“...Oh-ho.”

Gilgamesh surveyed the broken pieces of his own armor with an icy look, slightly narrowed his eyes, and...

“The barbarian has considerable skill with the bow, but he is ignorant of manners. I shall use him to clear the rust from my treasures!”

The next instant, a gigantic Noble Phantasm appeared beyond the shattered glass, floating alongside the top floor.

“What is...”

“Tine, you shall ride in back.”

“May I?”

“Were I to leave you here, I could not entirely protect you from those hateful arrows. It would be inconvenient if you, my Master, were to die before I fulfill my agreement with my friend.”

Tine responded to her “king’s” matter-of-fact declaration with a forceful nod, and climbed onto the rear of enormous Noble Phantasm.



One of the many Noble Phantasms that Gilgamesh possessed — Vimana. Shaped like a golden yacht that had sprouted gigantic fairy wings, it was a miniature flying warship. The king's hoard, said to include every treasure, included not only weapons, but all the fruits of human intellect.

Once Tine was on all fours at Vimana's rear, Gilgamesh launched his golden craft. Tine was nearly sent flying by the sudden acceleration, but she invoked windbreak and gravity manipulation magecraft, and somehow managed to steady her balance and breathing.

Gilgamesh took up an imposing stance in the prow, and set the ship on a straight course toward the archer. Arrows — presumably fired by his target — flew at him periodically, but the dozens of interception systems Gilgamesh had deployed around the ship shot were shooting them down perfectly.

“Amazing...”

The girl realized afresh what she was riding on, and could not suppress an exclamation.

“Even something like this...”

Was the emotion in the voice of the girl who thought she had thrown all hers away awe, or was it longing?

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North Snowfield. On the high slope of a ravine.

“...Oh-ho,” the archer muttered, looking at the golden ship that had now arrived in front of him. His voice was low. Behind it lay a tinge of admiration, and a faint hint of self-mockery.

“You were the one who launched that surprise attack. I suppose you don't intend to beg for your life?” Gilgamesh asked. He had alighted onto the rise from the prow of his ship.

In response, the uncanny archer, who stood roughly ten meters ahead of him, slowly raised his head.

“...”

“Do you have any last words?” Gilgamesh asked.

The mysterious archer, however, gave no answer. He silently drew his bow taut... and unflinching launched an arrow at Tine, who was poking her head out from behind Vimana's rear seat.

“!”

The supersonic missile rushed at Tine's face. She might be able to deaden the shockwave with a wall of wind, but she could not block the arrow itself. Tine was once again conscious of

death approaching before her eyes, when... Vimana's Options — the interception Noble Phantasms — shot it down in the nick of time.

"Fool. Did you imagine they would deactivate when I disembarked?"

"..."

Ignoring Gilgamesh's words, the archer fired a second shot, and then a third in quick succession. Tine had already hidden herself inside the craft, but he continued to ply his bow with a force that threatened to pierce Vimana's armor along with her.

A vein pulsed in Gil's temple. An onlooker, had there been any, could have told that the man was not seriously trying to shoot Tine, ship and all — he was simply trying to provoke the Heroic Spirit Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh either failed to notice that provocation, or, having noticed it, was yet more irritated by the archer's continuing to ignore him and target his Master, because an tinge of anger began to creep into his dispassionate tone.

"I see. That is certainly the correct choice, if you are obsessed with victory, or if you would choose the easy path to it. I might do the same myself in jest, depending on the circumstances."

A moment later...

"But such acts are permissible only because it is I who do them! They are not for the likes of you!"

Bellowing a declaration that stretched the limits of credulity, Gilgamesh launched countless Noble Phantasms from his Gate of Babylon, which opened behind him.

The archer seemed helpless under the rain of blades, some of which were of high rank. He, however, brandished his bow with his left hand, and went about sweeping aside the shower of Noble Phantasms with a speed that defied even a Heroic Spirit's expectations.

"What?"

"..."

The Heroic Spirit, who had deflected dozens of Noble Phantasms without so much as a scratch, wordlessly stretched an arm out to Gilgamesh, palm up, and beckoned provocatively to him with his fingers. When Gilgamesh saw that, his eyes narrowed, and he struggled to keep fury out of the voice that resounded across the rise.

"...I see you have light fingers. In that case... how about this?"

With a malicious grin, Gilgamesh deployed his Gate of Babylon over a wide area of the rise. The entrances to his treasury, deployed so as to surround the archer on all sides, began to twist like a tornado. Then they fired innumerable Noble Phantasms with the force of machine guns, raising a veritable whirlwind of lights and impacts high above the eminence.

Tens, hundreds, thousands of Noble Phantasms poured down on the man who stood in the tornado's center. They were blades or wisdom; suffering or salvation. There were dragon-slaying

long swords; cursed swords that bring ruin; hero-killing spears; formless thunderbolts. The originals of every Noble Phantasm that human hands had ever possessed or created were being hurled out unsparingly. A hellish rain of mankind's legends, fired from every conceivable angle.

Tine, witnessing that fearsome scene, imagined that not even a single scrap of the archer's flesh would survive it. As the whirlwind settled, however, it disclosed a sight that betrayed both Gilgamesh and Tine's expectations — the archer, unharmed and brushing dust from the long cloth that covered his body, and mountains of innumerably Noble Phantasms piled about him.

"Impossible..."

Gilgamesh, in contrast to the wide-eyed Tine, stared wordlessly at his opponent. For a brief while, silence reigned on the rise. Until it was broken by the archer's stifled laughter.

"He... hehe... he... heh... ha... ha ha..."

There was obvious derision in the sounds audible from beneath the cloth.

"...What's so funny?" Gilgamesh asked, expressionless.

The archer responded with a single, clearly-spoken word:

"Weak."

If anyone who had confronted Gilgamesh in the past had heard that word, they would have doubted them man's sanity.

"..."

It seemed to Tine that the temperature of the area had suddenly and precipitously dropped.

"Blindly hurling your arms... You would do better to throw sand," the mysterious archer continued in spite of the atmosphere. "Only a real weakling — or a mindless beast — would be felled by such child's play."

It was a feeble voice, but its words were more than simple ridicule. They seemed charged with some implacable obsession.

"...Oh?"

Gilgamesh's expression changed. Tine was worried that he might explode into a rage, but, on the contrary, there was actually a faint smile playing about the corners of his mouth. In that instant, Gilgamesh's ruling emotion had switched over from "anger at an ill-mannered assailant" to "curiosity concerning a powerful foe."

"...Draw the sword in the deepest recessed of your storehouse. Then we shall be equals," the mysterious archer declared to the King of Heroes. Whether he had received the information from someone, or had sensed an exceptional presence from within the "treasury" during the

earlier attack, he was telling Gilgamesh to “come at me with your most powerful weapon.”

“Ea is practically my other self. It is no sword to be used on a weakling such as you,” Gilgamesh cheerfully returned the provocation, grinding his teeth as he smiled.

Then another sword appeared in Gilgamesh’s hand, in place of Ea the Divider — Merodach, said to be the original of swords of selection told of in various regions of the globe. A sword to determine whether his opponent merited drawing Ea, which symbolized himself.

“Prove to me that you are mighty enough to be worthy of beholding Ea.”

“Foolish... If you had drawn it, you would not have to die,” the archer whispered, then stretched out his free right hand to his side.

A new cloth materialized in it. At first glance it appeared to be a sash painted with a plain design, but those capable of viewing things from another perspective would immediately be able to tell how strange it was.

“That is unmistakably... a Noble Phantasm...!”

Even to Tine’s eyes, the magical energy coating that sash seemed abnormal. When Gilgamesh saw that cloth, so coated in a divine aura so thick that it seemed an actual god must have used it, his eyes narrowed slightly.

“It differs somewhat from the gods I know, but it seems the principle is the same...”

It was a Noble Phantasm that held no interest for the self-proclaimed misotheist Gilgamesh. He was, however, curious to see what transformation the archer might now display. His Gate of Babylon had proved ineffective, so there was no sense in a surprise attack. Gilgamesh struck an imposing stance, and waited for his opponent to act with half-expectant eyes.

“ ... ”

The archer smiled behind his cloth, and made ready to unleash the power of his Noble Phantasm. A few second later, a blow imbued with divinity shook the earth.

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The great forest.

“Gil... seems to be fighting someone strong...”

Enkidu abruptly stopped what he was doing and turned his gaze to the northeast of the forest. It was merely an expanse of tress, but Enkidu could see something else. Using his Sense Presence skill, he was able to sense Gil’s strong aura from afar, as well as another, equally power-

ful presence.

“It’s strange. I have a feeling we’ve gone over the number of Heroic Spirits summoned in a Grail War,” Enkidu wondered, but decided that such things happen, and went on with his work. All the while keeping alert to Gil’s presence, and readying himself to go and check immediately if it weakened.

“Oh?”

With the result that, barely a few minutes later, he sensed another abnormality. Another, entirely different presence had suddenly appeared right beside where his friend and the other were fighting.

“Another presence... and another strong one.”

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On the rise.

A blow imbued with divinity shook the earth. But it was not the mysterious archer who had launched it.

“...What?”

Tine, who had peeked her head out from Vimana’s rear seat, could not believe what she was seeing. Just as the archer had been about to unleash the power of his cloth, a horse had appeared out of nowhere, and the girl riding it had landed behind him.

Her age was probably between 16 and 18. At the very least, she did not look like she could be more than 20. Her long hair was neatly gathered at the back of her head. The healthy tone of her skin was wrapped in a peculiar garment of soft cloth and leather.

The girl, who gave an overall impression of activity, soundlessly approached the archer from behind with a look of cold dignity on her face.

“...?”

Gilgamesh furrowed his brows. The archer, noticing his gaze, tried to turn... and the girl’s fist embedded itself deep into his cloth-covered face.

The sound of the impact seemed like nothing less than an explosion. The archer’s body was launched with the force of a bullet to lodge itself in the side of another small eminence, which then began to crumble.

After a moment of silence, a simple fact dominated — the girl's slender arm had sent a man on whom the Noble Phantasms Gilgamesh fired from his Gate of Bayblon had had no effect flying.

The girl glared at the pile of rubble that had buried the archer alive with eyes filled with a powerful hate, then glanced behind her at Tine and Gilgamesh, and declared:

“That fiend is my prey. Do not interfere.”

After a brief pause, Gilgamesh narrowed his eyes.

“...This is precisely what is meant by ‘killing the mood,’ girl.”

From Gilgamesh's tone, Tine judged that he was definitely displeased. His heart-pounding battle had been interrupted, so anger was to be expected. And if you included the first day, this was the second time someone had put a damper on one of his fights.

The situation being critical, Tine attempted to at least discover their opponent's identity. One fact, however, deeply confused her. The cloth wrapped around the archer's arm had seemed to be a Noble Phantasm, and yet the exact same cloth was wrapped around the arm of the girl in front of her. It was not just the pattern; even the potent divine aura that seemed to shake the air around it was identical.

It couldn't be... the same Noble Phantasm...?

As Tine wondered, and Gilgamesh stewed in his rage... the rubble of the collapsed rise burst with a thunderous roar like an erupting volcano.

The mighty gathered in a Holy Grail War where real and fake intermingle... and the fate of the Grail was dragged ever deeper into the chaotic morass.



## Bridging Chapter

“One Day, In the Forest”

## **Bridging Chapter**

### One Day, In the Forest

Afternoon. The great forest.

Assassin had been wandering in the forest for half a day now. She was sure she had chosen the shortest route back to the city, but for some reason she could not seem to get clear of the trees. After using Meditative Sensitivity: Zabaniya to make sure of the surrounding terrain, she had arrived at a troubling conclusion — it seemed that the entire forest was shifting in obedience to someone's will. The terrain would shift slightly, and even here orientation would change. With a liberal use of Meditative Sensitivity, she would be able to escape the forest easily. Then an idea struck her.

*Who created the Bounded Field in this forest? I must at least confirm whether they are friend or foe. If I could drag that monster into it, it might give me an advantage.*

With that thought in mind, Assassin advanced cautiously toward where the magical energy was thickest. At last, she came in sight of two Heroic Spirits, squaring off among the trees.

"You've done well to make it this far, although I doubt you could have managed it unless you are loved by the forest, or have some special power."

"I got Locksley — a friend of mine — to show me the way."

"Oh? I see. You do appear to have a lot of friends."

Saber answered Lancer's words with a broad grin.

"You can see them?"

"A little."

The odd conversation done with, Lancer shifted to the real matter at hand.

"And? What business do you have with me?"

Saber looked at the spectacled girl stroking a wolf behind him as he replied.

"Well, you see, I don't know your true name, or what kind of Heroic Spirit you are... but I decided to wander around a bit, and ask the first Servant I found."

Then he made his proposal — a short sentence with the potential to drag this Holy Grail War even further into its vortex of chaos:

"Would you mind forming an alliance with us?"

*Fate/Strange Fake 2*

As an offer, it was far too abrupt. Lancer stared blankly at Saber, then smiled kindly, and opened his mouth to answer. And the answer he gave was...

next episode: [Fake03]



# CLASS ASSASSIN

Master: The Dead Apostle Jester Karture

Name: — (She had already abandoned her name by the time she gained the attributes of a Heroic Spirit.

Sex: Woman

H&W: 163cm 53Kg

Alignment: Lawful good

STR 

**C**

M.E 

**C**

END 

**B**

LCK 

**D**

AGI 

**A**

NP 

**B+**

## Personal Skills

Fanaticism: A

She gains ordinarily inconceivable willpower as a result of believing in a specific thing to the extent that her faith transcends her understanding of her surroundings. She quickly overcomes trauma, and gains strong resistance to mental manipulation magecraft, etc.

## Class Skills

Presence Concealment: A-

Noble Phantasm

Phantasmal Pedigree:  
Z a b a n i y a

Rank: E-A; Classification: Anti-Personnel, Anti-Army Noble Phantasm; Range: —

The ability to freely alter her body to recreate 18 storied techniques of the past.

In reality she underwent extreme body modification, but upon becoming a Heroic Spirit it became an ability to alter her body at will. The power of individual techniques is greater or lesser than their originals on a case-by-case basis.

# CLASS TRUE ASSASSIN

Master: *Faldeus Dioland*

Name: *Hassan-i Sabbah*

Sex: *Man*

*Unconfirmed, even by Faldeus.*

## Personal Skills

*Shadow Lantern: A*

*The skill of becoming one with the very shadows. Because he obtains magical energy from the surrounding area through shadows, he barely requires his Master to supply him with energy unless he materializes.*

## Class Skills

*Presence Concealment: EX*

*(Becoming one with the world itself. Becomes A+ only when he shifts to attack.)*

*Noble Phantasm*



## Afterword (contains spoilers for this book, so be warned)

And so, I present the second volume of Fate/Strange Fake.

I have a feeling I've been quite unreasonable, so I was worried if it would pass checks from Nasu-san and other concerned parties. I am deeply moved to be able to deliver it into all of your hands.

I think the routes will be getting complexly intertwined as things go on, so I would be happy if you continue to enjoy it.

By the way, about the mysterious female Heroic Spirit who shows up at the end: some fans of the Fate series so far may have seen the description of her hairstyle and thought, "Wait a minute, she's not another Saber-face, is she?" Fortunately (or unfortunately), however, she just has a similar hair style and their faces are nothing alike. The reason for the similar hair styles, by the way, is so trivial that I don't know if I'll even get around to telling it by the last volume.

With that out of the way, new Heroic Spirits who weren't part of the 7th annual April Fool's project have started to show just a bit of themselves, but I think those of you who are well up in that line will be able to tell who they are at once.

Speaking of which, I've made use of episodes from several reference books and research papers for episodes from the lives of the various Heroic Spirits, but I've significantly arranged them to fit the setting, so I take full responsibility for every time something differs from historical fact. Please just read it as, "That's how it is in this world."

The case of Caster and the man who sat next to him in theater, for example, is told in far greater detail in Mr. Guy Endore's excellent novel, *King of Paris*. The back and forth about vampires is extremely interesting, so I recommend giving it a read if you ever have the chance. (The discussion about Dead Apostles is, of course, original to this book.)

Now, when the first book came out I received a lot of letters, etc., asking, "I know Enkidu's stats change, but what about his fundamental point total?" I vividly remember consulting with Nasu-san before it went on sale.

Me: "About Enkidu's stats, he has 'Transfiguration,' so I wanted to set his point total..."

Nasu: "Hmm. He is Enkidu, and he's A rank, so all As."

Me: "All As!?! But isn't that even higher than Berserker in the 5th!?! Everyone's going to say, 'Heroic Spirit favoritism! He's a Mary Sue!' (A general term for 'Here's my ultimate OC who's way stronger and more popular and luckier than all the characters in the original work! Yahoo!'-type characters in fan works, etc.)"

Nasu: "Don't let it get to you."



Me: "But, I mean, all As is even higher than Karna."

Nasu: "Don't let it get to you."

Me: "To be honest, it's so high that even I think his stats are too exaggerated..."

Nasu: "I said, don't let it get to you!"

Me: "Eep!"

Nasu: "If you think about it the other way, it's Nemes\*'s... All As is his base, and if he raises his strength to A+, another stat goes down two ranks..."

Me: "What cool-headed and precise worldbuilding...!"

Nasu: "And if... (etc., etc.)"

The editorial supervision I received was along those lines. As a result, please consider that, as of book 1, Enkidu's total stat points are hovering at "a little less than all As." But if his Master, the silver wolf, completely recovers, then even all As aren't just a dream. (The "etc., etc." is still a secret.)

In any case, I got strong encouragement from Nasu-san when drafting the plot: "I'll deal with any amount of inflation on my end! In fact, writing something timid and shrinking like that won't make anyone happy, so stop it, boy!" That put my fears to rest.

...That said, I still have a "W-was this really a good idea...?" feeling about making Hansa a full-body cyborg... but I'm sure it will be alright. The Holy Church's science is the best in the world.

Also, the mysterious archer who shows up at the end is an Heroic Spirit with a good reason for being able to go toe-to-toe with Gilgamesh, the "oldest and mightiest of heroes," so I'd be delighted if you would take a long-term view of him!

Speaking of which, I don't know if his stats will appear in this volume, so I'll reference them here, but the Assassin Faldeus summoned has the skill "Erase Presence: EX," so in exchange his normal stats are lower compared to other Assassins. Balance!

Still, getting editorial oversight was fun. I got to hear all sorts of inside stories, like the fact that "Gilgamesh doesn't know a lot about Dead Apostles," and the reason for it...! (Although that reason isn't directly connected to Fake.)

Whether the details of Ayaka's past and Saber's true name will be revealed next time... hasn't been decided yet, but more factions are forming, and the situation in Snowfield is growing ever more volatile, so I'd be happy if you would enjoy the long-term view! I think the pace will be roughly two volumes a year, so I hope that you'll keep reading!

My manager, Anan-san, who I gave a lot of trouble with deadlines; my Dura manager, Wada-san, who adjusted the schedule for Durarara!! — which I was working on at the same time — and everyone in the editorial department; all the concerned parties who I am indeb-

ted to through their Fate spinoffs, beginning with Urobuchi Gen-san, Higashide Yūichirō-san, Sakurai Hikaru-san, Mashin Eiichirou-san, and Sanda Makoto-san; Team Barrel Roll, who did part of the Servant background research for me; Morii Shizuki-san, who is drawing the second volume of the manga version of Fate/Strange Fake in parallel to this book, and who, despite a busy schedule, still drew a fantastic cover and illustrations for me; and, most importantly, Nasu Kinoko-san, who created Fate and provided me with editorial oversight; everyone at TYPE-MOON... as well as all the readers who picked up this book and made it this far:

Thank you very much!

April 2015, while participating in TYPE-MOON's April Fool's.

Narita Ryōgo